Chapter Eleven:

ALL THE WORLD'S KNOWLEDGE IN A FORMULA.

An important aspect of Cubism was its relationship with the scientific revolution of the time. The total 'newness' (as it seemed) of the Cubist paintings was appropriate to a period in which the very bases of all previous knowledge seemed to have been undermined, and unimaginable new vistas of science seemed to be opening up. This chapter deals with what Khlebnikov felt to be his own contribution to this revolution in human knowledge.
ALONG WITH THE UNITY OF HUMAN TONGUES, the unity of all knowledge became for Khlebnikov an ever more potent dream. In search of its fulfilment, the poet began studying an extraordinarily wide variety of facts culled from the library-books he could lay his hands on. "I am studying mountains and their location on the earth's crust", he wrote to Kruchenykh in 1913.¹ He also built complicated equations designed to express the motions of the planets and their relation to the speed of light. His equation for the planet Earth looked like this:

\[ M \cdot 365.24.60.60.\text{v.} = PR^2 \frac{48PR^2}{365} \]

The equation for Jupiter was more complicated:

\[ 300.00 \cdot 1044 \cdot 11 \cdot 6000 \cdot 86400 = 3.777^210^{12} \]
\[ \frac{48 \cdot 3 \cdot 777^2 \cdot 10^{12}}{1044} \]

He wrote that it was the same for Venus, and that "in this consists the first boomerang aimed at Newton".²

Khlebnikov's thirst for mathematical material seemed unquenchable. To his friend Spassky he wrote:

I need books with numbers in them.³

It was almost as if it hardly mattered what the subject of study was, so long as the information could be expressed in numerical form. In May 1914 he wrote to Kamensky:

A business proposition: jot down the days and hours of your emotions, as if they moved like the stars. Yours and hers. And namely their angles, turns, climax points. And I will construct an equation!⁴

³. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 301.
Khlebnikov studied the chronicle of Pushkin's life—and Gogol's—in order to construct still more equations. He made detailed notes of the exact times of the experiences of his own life and discovered perfect mathematical correlations. To Matyushin he wrote in December 1914, for example:

This year I notice a reverse relationship with the past. That is, the days which were gloomy for me last year have been bright this year.  

Later he would ponder on the significance of the fact that "the number of bones in a human being is 48 times 5 = 240", and that "the surface of a red blood cell is equal to the surface of the earth divided by 365 to the power of ten."  

Max Rychner writes of Joyce's Ulysses that in it:

Nothing is isolated or separate; even the most singular, the most incomprehensible thing makes itself felt in countless connections which at first are unrecognizable, but reveal themselves in their darkness to sympathetic men.  

The same notion of universal interconnectedness runs through Khlebnikov's work. His studies of the planets and stars are based on the firm belief that the laws governing their motions are the same as those governing the lives of men. As he put it himself:

The breath of the same mouth of time covers both the windowpanes of stars and the panes of human destinies; the same laws work in both.  

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1. SP V pp 271-273.
But above all, Khlebnikov's work is about the history of mankind, the rise and fall of empires, wars, revolutions and the laws of time underlying these events. It was this historical process which Khlebnikov dreamed of mastering with his "equations" and his plan for a world-government or "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere". Early in the course of the First World War—in the first or second week of December, 1914—he became excitedly convinced that he could "foresee" some of the major battles of the war. To Matyushin he wrote:

These days are important to me because, according to my calculations, on the fifteenth and twentieth of December there ought to be some naval battles of the first magnitude. I wrote about this long ago to Kuzmin (his address is Kuzmin, First Aviation Company, Polytechnical Institute, Petrograd). And now, today, on the sixteenth, our paper publishes "rumours of a major naval engagement." Tomorrow I will know for sure whether one occurred or not. If it did, then I will be able to determine exactly the dates of the great naval battles—and their outcome—for the whole of this war. The days and nights of conquest! I have picked on this day as an experiment. If it turns out wrong, then I will chuck in the computations, the regularities of exhausting calculations. And for a whole month I have been living only for this.

Unfortunately, the "rumours" proved without substance and the eagerly-expected battles failed to materialize. Undaunted, Khlebnikov wrote to Matyushin acknowledging his "mistake" and outlining the premises on which his calculations had been based. Essentially, his idea seems to have been that correspondences can be established across time: that the great events

1. Compare with Walter Rybert's comment on Finnegans Wake that it is about "man's history, the rise and fall of his civilizations, his nations and his families..."—extract in: Denning, op cit p 733.

of world history are repetitions, on a different plane, of events which occurred in the distant past. As he explained to Matyushin, his premise was:

The assumption that a particular war is a repetition of age-old times preceding it...

Another premise—flowing from this—was:

that, as regards the naval war of 1914, one must turn to the century of battles waged by Islam against the West from the beginning of the Crusades to 1095.  

A third assumption was that, once a correspondence between two events has been established, the same correspondence would be found to extend to cover yet further events.

Having admitted his mistakes, Khlebnikov did not abandon his attempts but plunged deeper into them. He later described how he had to be rescued from his obsession by his friends:

Khlebnikov drowned in a bog of calculations, and was forcibly saved.

In 1916 he wrote to two friends of the ultimate aim of his researches:

The summit—the whole of knowledge in a single equation the size of $\sqrt{-1}$

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2. Ibid p 376. There seems to be an important relationship between Khlebnikov's theory of temporal correspondences and a central theme of the Symbolists. In the case of the latter, "correspondences" were established, by means of the sounds and symbols of language, between "this world" and "other worlds" conceived to exist on other planes in a preponderantly time-less, motionless state of being. The Symbolists' language was thought of as suffused with the light from these other worlds, into which the reader was thereby brought into contact. Khlebnikov's peculiar transformation of this idea was primarily based on its re-construction, as it were, along a time-axis. This would have been in accordance with his call: "Replace the concept of space everywhere with the concept of time"—1915-16 SP V p 159. Thus it was the future with which his language was suffused: "Iearm: upon language the future's shadow is cast"—1914, SP V p 193; "...the homeland of creation is the future. It is from there that the word-gods blow their wind"—SP II p 8. The "other world" into which his work ushered humanity was this future, with which there were "correspondences" with the pre-historic past.

Chapter Twelve:

THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE.

This chapter begins by returning to the year 1908, in order to trace the origins of the impulse which led Khlebnikov eventually to his world-government plan. The idea of "presiding" over the entire globe represents another aspect of that "carrying to extremes" of Symbolist premises—while at the same time overthrowing them—which has been discussed in earlier chapters. It represents another aspect of the explosion of the "I" and its merging in a global "We" which has been described as central to Khlebnikov's work. The chapter concludes with a survey of some of the scientific and technological projects which Khlebnikov's world-government was to implement.
IN 1908, KHLEBNIKOV had already begun to recoil from the Symbolists' sense of futility, powerlessness and the imminence of catastrophe. As a Symbolist himself, he had written to his fellow-artists:

We know nothing, we foretell nothing, we simply ask in terror: has the time really come, really come?\(^1\)

Khlebnikov soon decided that "the time" had come, and that the much-feared ultimate cataclysm should be positively welcomed and plunged into.\(^2\) The experience of uncertainty was in this way overcome, while the feeling of "knowing nothing" and "foretelling" nothing was replaced by the sensation of knowing everything and foretelling everything, as we have seen.

In a similar "turning inside out" of Symbolist forms and premises,\(^3\) Khlebnikov reached his own form of artistic collectivism not by a crude negation of the Symbolists' "ego" but by expanding its walls, until it became so enormous and vaguely-defined as to appear to merge with the human collectivity. An aspect of this process was his peculiar idea of becoming the "King of Time" and the "President of the Terrestrial Sphere".

The poet's first mention of his "Government" project seems to have been made in a letter to Kamensky written in the spring

\(^1\) Neizd. P p 322.
\(^2\) It was partly for this reason that Khlebnikov (like Mayakovsky) for a brief period actually welcomed the First World War. Another reason was that Khlebnikov saw in it an aspect of the struggle of the East against the West. See Nesor. P pp 405-06. A fierce anti-militarism soon replaced these moods, however.
\(^3\) "Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art"—Trotsky, Lit. & Rev'n., quoted in: Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, N Y 1970, p 37 (introduction by P N Siegel).
of 1914. Here the idea that "the time" had arrived was fervently expressed, even though introduced in the form of a question:

All in all, isn't it time to rush to Razin's boats? Everything is ready. We will form a Government of the President of the Terrestrial Sphere. Prepare a list. Send it.

The "list", presumably, was to be of the names of the artists or others willing to "join" his supposed "Government." The central figure in the Government was obviously going to be Khlebnikov himself. The poet was allowing his "ego" to become inflated in his own dream-world to an extent which might have embarrassed even a Mayakovskiy, or one of the most self-centred of the Symbolists. In 1916, Khlebnikov wrote, referring to his alter-ego, "Ka":

Ka became my teacher. Under his guidance, I gradually became the chief of the terrestrial sphere. I received a letter: "To the Chief of the Terrestrial Sphere"—there were no other words.  

But in being expanded on this scale, Khlebnikov's "ego" was in a sense being turned inside-out and dissolved into an apparent one-ness with the entire human race. This paradoxical route to collectivism—through a carrying of egotism to impossible extremes—was also characteristic of Mayakovskiy. As Trotsky notes in this connection:

The universalization of one's ego breaks down, to some extent, the limits of one's individuality, and brings one nearer to the collectivity—from the reverse end.

It was, of course, the same death of the "I" and birth of the "We" which we noted earlier that underlay this process. Trotsky's comment here is that "extremes meet", and it is this process of transformation of things into their opposites which explains why

1. SP V p 303.
2. Ibid p 137.
3. Trotsky adds: "But this is true only to a certain degree..."—Literature and Revolution, p 149.
for all the apparent egotism just mentioned, D S Mirsky could write that the "I" never became a poetic theme with Khlebnikov. The poet's peculiar impersonalism or collectivism was a point fervently insisted upon by the Cubo-Futurists, who distinguished themselves thereby from the so-called "Ego-Futurists". Boris Lavrenyev writes how, at a meeting between the ego- and cubo-futurists in his apartment in 1913, David Burlyuk denounced the former because they

were really not futurists at all and had no right to usurp that name... By the very prefix "ego", the ego-futurists underlined their narrow individualist horizon... "You are egoists, while we Khlebnikovians, we Hileans are universalists", David said.2

Khlebnikov's championship of the power of the "We" appears in a variety of forms throughout his work, from the sound of "thousands of voices" (accompanied by the rumblings of mountains) shouting "We can!" in "Zangezi" to a note in which, writing of himself, Khlebnikov explains:

The iron sword of the "We" cut the "I"-sword of copper.3

The re-construction or re-unification of the archaic tribal "We" of humanity was of course, as we have seen, the ultimate aim of all Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts. The fragmentation of the ancient unity into separate "egos" is lamented in the following poetic lines:

Ведь мы и ведь мы я
Великой ведуны мы (не тымы, а мы)
Стоим у ворот великого Мы...

Ведь мы мирское целое
Делим на я, на множество я,
Муку я.
Дерево Господина Народа
Мелем на я,
Состоим из многих частей.4

1. Quoted by Markov. For this and similar comments by critics, see his The Longer Poems... p 34.
4. SP V pp 112-113; written in 1922.
If in his world-government project, Khlebnikov in one sense carried the "I"-principle to extremes, it was really to transcend this principle altogether and re-unite the "I's" of all humanity into the primeval "We". As Khlebnikov described his own work:

I piece together the human race, like the parts Of a whole conceived long ago.

In 1916, Khlebnikov wrote an extraordinary manifesto entitled "Martian Trumpet", to which he obtained the signatures of a number of colleagues, and which he himself signed in the capacity of "The King of Time, Velimir ISt". It began with an attack on existing states for being based on spatial axes rather than on the axis of time. The next section was an attack on those subordinated to the reign of byt:

Those who are drowned in the laws of family-life and the laws of commerce—those who have only one speech: "I eat"—do not understand us, thinking neither of this, nor that, nor the other.

These sections of the population were identified with the older generations. Satisfied with the present constitution of things, they were nearer death than birth. "But we", Khlebnikov continued,

we have explored the soil of the continent of Time—and have found it to be fruitful... We call you to a land where the trees speak, where associations of scientists resemble waves, where there are spring troops of love, where Time blossoms like a bird-cherry tree and moves like a piston, and where transman in a carpenter's apron saws time into boards and like a lathe-operator handles his own tomorrow.

1. SP I p 177.
2. SP V p 152.
3. Loc cit. Khlebnikov's classification of the opposing forces in society can be compared with Hayakovsky's version: "to be a bourgeois does not mean to own capital or squander gold. It means to be the heel of a corpse on the throat of the young. It means a mouth stopped up with fat. To be a proletarian doesn't mean to have a dirty face and work in a factory; it means to be in love with the future that's going to explode the filth of the cellars...Believe me"—quoted by Jakobson, On a Generation... in: E J Brown, op cit p 13.
Khlebnikov called on the world's youth to "raise the winged sails of time" and to strike "a new blow in the eyes of the crude folk of space". He then went on to explain that the struggle of youth against age was also the fight of inventors (изобретатели) against proprietors (предприниматели). Scientific inventors fought for time; property-owners only for space, stealing the produce of inventors in the process. Khlebnikov gave an example of this theft:

From the standpoint of the proprietors themselves, the whole of modern industry on the terrestrial sphere is "theft" (in the proprietors' language and morals) from the first inventor—Gauss. He founded the study of lightning. And yet during his life he did not have 150 rubles annually for his scientific work.

After further explanations, Khlebnikov concluded—placing himself and his colleagues in the camp of "inventors":

That is why, fully conscious of their special nature, different morality and peculiar mission, the inventors separate themselves from the proprietors in a sovereign state of time (without space), placing rods of iron between themselves and them.

At about the same time that he wrote this manifesto, Khlebnikov made a series of "proposals". One was to use heartbeats as the "monetary units of the future". Another was:

Put an end to the Great War with the first flight to the Moon.

A selection of various other "proposals" follows:

1. SP V pp 152-53.
2. Ibid p 153.
3. Loc cit.
4. Ibid p 157. There is an echo of this idea in Mayakovsky's Man, in which the bourgeois enemy declares: "If the heart is everything then why, why have I been gathering you, my dear money!"—quoted in: Jakobson, On a Generation, in: E J Brown, op cit p 15.
5. SP V p 157.
Let air-sailing be one foot, and the gift of spark-speech the other foot of humanity. What next: we'll see.

Introduce monkeys into the family of man and give them certain rights of citizenship.

Establish a special empty island (Iceland, for example), as a place for uninterrupted war between those of all countries who want it. (Splendid death).

Introduce as much order and system into the business of giving birth as now prevails in the business of killing; birth-armies, in limited numbers.

Replace the concept of space everywhere with the concept of time—for example, wars between the generations of the terrestrial sphere, wars of time-entrenchments.

It would be impossible to avoid destroying trains, if their movements were limited only to within space...

A re-organization of housing rights. The right to rooms in any town, and the right to change one's dwelling-place continually (the right to a home independently of the dimensions of space). Airborne mankind does not let private space restrict his property.

Construct houses in the form of iron lattice-work, so that little mobile dwellings of glass can be inserted anywhere.

Demand that armed groups of people with weapons in their hands refute the opinion of the Futurists—that the entire Terrestrial Globe belongs to them.

Arouse in factory chimney pipes the desire to sing morning praise to the rising sun—whether over the Seine, or in Tokyo, or over the Nile, or in Delhi.

Introduce radio for the transmission of lectures from the Central University to village schools. Any school at the foot of a green hill will receive scientific news, and the teacher will be the ear-trumpet of the attentive village. The language of lightnings as conductor of scientific truth.

Accomplish the transfer of power gradually to the starry sky...

Treat the Earth as a resonant plate, and its capital cities as dust nodules gathered in still waves.

The world may be understood as a light-ray. You are a construction of spaces. We are a construction of time.¹

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1. SP V pp 158-162.
Soon after the February 1917 Revolution, Khlebnikov—
convinced that his mathematical prophecies had been or were
being realized—wrote ecstatically to his friend Petnikov:

Is the universal roar of insurrections terrifying to us—
when we ourselves are an insurrection still more terrible?
You remember that a government of poets has been estab-
lished, embracing the terrestrial sphere. You remember
that a sonorous string of tribes has united Tokyo, Moscow
and Singapore. We are like the sea's waves during a grey
storm, one moment swelling and towering high, the next
rolling down and scattering wide. You recall that we have
succeeded in discovering the harmony of destinies, which
we need in order to lift humanity on the palm of our
thought to the next plane of existence. You know, this
wandering century—is going somewhere!¹

In April, Khlebnikov made a series of notes relating to an
"appearance" to be made by himself and Petnikov on some occasion.
Among these notes were:

Our answer to ward—the mousetrap.
The rays of my name.
The ray of humanity.
People as rays.
Beautiful waterfalls of numbers.
An armful of equations of fate.
The secret of humanity.
The ray of Khlebnikov.
The suicide of states.
The seige of languages.
Logs of time.
The ray of the world.
The world as a poem.
We have come to you from the future, from the distance of
centurigs. We gaze upon your time from the rock of the
future.²

At about the same time, Khlebnikov composed his "Declaration of
the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere":

Only we, having rolled up—like a scroll—
Your three years of war, to form a terrifying trumpet,
Sing and shout, sing and shout,
Drunk with the enchantment of the truth,
That the Government of the Terrestrial Sphere
Already exists:
It is—We.³

1. SP V p 313.
2. Ibid p 259.
3. IS p 170.
Khlebnikov blamed the War on the world's "states of space", which he likened to the cannibalistic gods of an earlier age:

Here in the name of all humanity
We turn to negotiations
With the states of the past:
If you, 0 states, are so fine,
As you love to describe yourselves,
And as you force your servants to describe you,
Then why this food-of-the-gods?
Why do we, the people, crunch in your jaws—
Between your canine teeth and your molars?!

In the future, explained Khlebnikov, these states would be destroyed: a Government of Poets would have taken their place, forming a State of Time. But that day had yet to be reached:

And in the meantime, mothers,
Carry your children away
Should a state anywhere appear.
Young people—run off and hide in the caves,
Or in the depths of the sea
Should you anywhere glimpse a state.
Young girls and all those who can't tolerate the
odour of death,
Fall into a swoon at the word "frontiers":
It stinks of corpses.  

In Petrograd in the spring of 1917 a grandiose "Carnival of the Arts" was staged. Writes Kamensky:

...writers, artists, composers and actors moved slowly down the Nevsky in a procession of automobiles strewn with flowers. Bringing up the rear of this 'carnival' procession of vehicles was a big lorry, on the side of which was inscribed in chalk:

THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE.

In the lorry in a soldier's greatcoat, sitting hunched-up, was Khlebnikov.  

1. Choix de poèmes, p 102. In another version of the "declaration" Khlebnikov wrote: "If you, states, are well-behaved—then why this food-of-the-gods? Why do we crunch between your jaws—we soldiers and sailors? But then if you are bad, 0 states, who among us will raise a little finger to prevent your destruction?"—SP V p 163.

2. Choix de poèmes, p 102.

3. Fut' entuziasta, M 1931, pp 256-7; quoted by Stepanov, introd to IS p 49.
Chapter Thirteen:

THE WORLD AS A LIGHT-RAY: KHLEBNIKOV AND THE ELECTRONICS REVOLUTION.

Khlebnikov's technological "futurism" was far more advanced than that of his "urbanist" contemporaries such as Marinetti. Khlebnikov drew little or no inspiration from the nineteenth-century steam-age and iron-age industrial revolution. But the electronics revolution, the invention of radio and the theories of Einstein—all connected, in one way or another, with the idea of electro-magnetic waves—were something different. In this chapter it is suggested that Khlebnikov's concept of "people-rays", his idea of the whole of humanity as "inhabiting" a "light-ray of fate" and his enthusiasm for radio were interconnected, and reflected a profound consciousness of the importance of the "inventions" and scientific discoveries which formed the background to the Cubist revolution in art.
POLITICALLY, the Futurists were at heart Anarchists. The "enemy" to them was not so much the rule of Capital or of the bourgeoisie as the reign of byt, which expressed itself in the greyness and grind of daily life, the routine of work, eating and sleep, the boredom of family existence—and the all-pervading fixed regulations, institutions and hierarchies of the state. Under the rule of byt, everything was fossilized, congealed, immovable. There was existence in space: everyone struggled for his own plot, his own cabbage-patch, his own position in or portion of the Terrestrial Sphere. But it was a timeless existence, or an existence subject only to the endless repetition of time, the interminable repetition of one and the same "today".

Khlebnikov's vision of the explosion of this "byt" was intimately connected with his sense of the significance of the scientific revolution which was taking place in his time. Fundamentally, he felt that radio-waves, movement at the speed of light, electronic technology and the prospect of space-travel were creating a new kind of man, for whom the struggle for fixed territory on the planet earth was becoming irrelevant. If man could exist on all points of the globe simultaneously, how could he bother any longer about fighting for space? How could he care any longer for frontiers, for fences, for private territory or for fatherlands? And if the old immobilities were dissolving, space was disappearing and the whole earth was becoming, as it were, a "ray"—then how could the new man avoid seeing his future struggle as a struggle for change, a struggle for time?
The link between Cubist painting and radio, electronics and the theories of Einstein—a link insisted upon by virtually all critics—has been discussed already. In the case of the French painters, the link operated largely on the level of the subconscious.¹ Those closely associated with the Cubist painters, such as their dealer, Kahnweiler and the poet Apollinaire, saw the parallel with the scientific revolution, writing and speaking about it at the time or soon afterwards. But the painters themselves were almost wholly unaware of what they were doing.

In the case of Khlebnikov, things were rather different. Having studied science at University, at least the images and forms of scientific thought (if not its real methods) had probably penetrated deeply into his consciousness. Almost certainly, this made it far easier for him than it would otherwise have been to grasp intellectually the link between his art and the scientific revolution which had been taking place.

For Khlebnikov, as we have seen, the "whole of contemporary industry" was essentially electronic—it stemmed from "the first inventor, Gauss", who "founded the study of lightning." For Khlebnikov, the implications of this were enormous. He had very little enthusiasm for mechanical movements and machines—the products of the earlier industrial revolution whose praises were perhaps belatedly being sung by Marinetti. But the heroes of the new technological revolution—radio and electronics—were for him quite another matter.²

1. Braque himself writes of the role of the subconscious in the Cubist revolution: "At such a time one has to follow dictates which are almost unconscious, because there is no knowing what will happen. The adventure through which one is living is one in which consciousness plays no part"—written in 1954; quoted in: John Russell, G Braque, London 1959, p 9.

2. Khlebnikov's hostility towards conventional machines is shown in his "The Crane", in which the world of machines rises up in an insurrection against man. Khlebnikov believed that "the tiniest vein on my hand is a laugh of scorn at all machines"—quoted by Stepanov, IS (introduction) p 67.
By facilitating instantaneous global communication, Radio may be thought of as inaugurating a new age—the age (to quote Marshall McLuhan) of "instant humans." Khlebnikov used the term "people-rays" (lyud-лучи), as we have seen. As early as the summer of 1910, he had written to Kamensky:

We—are a new breed of people-rays. We have come to illuminate the universe.2

And his notes about "the ray of humanity, people as rays, the ray of Khlebnikov, the ray of the world" and so on have already been cited.3 When Khlebnikov wrote to Petnikov about "a government of poets" and "a sonorous string of tribes" encircling the globe—and went on to declare:"We are like the sea's waves during a grey storm"—he was not being simply mystical.4 He had a concrete technological possibility in mind. In 1916 he had already quite convincingly—if also in certain respects fancifully—described this possibility. One form it had taken was the project for a "Higher Institute of Futurists", which would occupy not a particular geographical site but many sites widely separated over the globe (on the Asian side, however), its members communicating by means of radio-telegraphy:

Foundation of the first Higher Institute of Futurists (бодлыйян). It consists of a number (13) of estates borrowed (for 100 years) from people-of-space, situated on the sea-shore or among mountains by extinct volcanos in Siam, Siberia, Japan, Ceylon, Murmansk, among the empty mountains, where it is difficult to acquire prop-erty from anyone but easy to invent things. They are all united with each other through radio-telegraphy, on which lessons are given. To have a radio-telegraph of one's own. Communication through the air.5

1. "The age of co-presence of all individuals is the age of communication—the age of instant humans"—Counter-Blast, London 1969, p 35.
2. SP V p 291.
3. Ibid p 259.
4. The Symbolist composer Scriabin had written in his 1905-06 notebooks: "The whole world is inundated by the waves of my being"; in 1904 he had written: "I want to be the brightest light, the greatest (and only) sun. I want to illuminate the universe with my light"—quoted in: Faubion Bowers, Scriabin, p 101; p 54. Khlebnikov was partially de-mysticizing this streak in Symbolism, giving it a technological twist.
5. SP V p 156.
This should be seen also in the context of the passages quoted already, in which Khlebnikov envisaged radio-transmission of lectures "to any school at the foot of a green hill", saw "the language of lightning" as the "conductor of scientific truth", and hailed "air-sailing" and "the gift of spark-speech" as the two new "feet" of humanity.

A reading of Khlebnikov's writings on "fate"—especially his post-revolutionary ones—shows that the idea of motion at the speed of light and the concept of humanity as a sort of "light-ray" or radio-wave were not mere incidental notions but were absolutely fundamental to his developing world-view. In his now-characteristic way, he saw the "ray of humanity"—in his "Nasha Osnova" written in 1920—as moving not through space but through time. He likened the 317-yearly "shifts" of human history (which he believed he had 'discovered') to the vibrations of a balalaika-string. This was only one of several such balalaika-notes: the vibrations of another string were manifested in people's heart-beats and footsteps; another represented "the central axis of the sonorous world."¹ But for Khlebnikov, the long-wave string—pulsing at intervals of 317 years—was the most important one. The extent to which the idea of electromagnetic waves and their control had penetrated into Khlebnikov's consciousness may be gauged from the following passage, in which the poet elaborates his idea of humanity as a ray through time:

Once science had measured the light-wave, studying it in the light of figures, it became possible to regulate the course of rays. The image of a distant star is brought up close to the writing-table with these mirrors. The sizes of infinitely small things, previously invisible, become accessible view...

Let us suppose that a light-wave were populated by rational beings, with their government, laws and even prophets. Wouldn't it appear to them that a scientist who used mirrors to regulate the course of waves was an almighty

¹. SF V p 239.
divinity? If prophets existed on such a light-wave, they would glorify the scientist's power and flatter him: "You breathe—and the oceans move; you speak—and they flow back"; they would lament that they could not do this themselves.

Now, having studied the mighty rays of human fate, whose waves are populated by people, each single pulse lasting for centuries, human thought can aspire to apply to them the techniques of mirror-regulation, building a force consisting of a pair of convex and concave lenses. It may be imagined that the century-sized oscillations of our giant ray will be no less obedient to the scientist than infinitely small waves of light-ray. Then people will be at one and the same time both the population inhabiting the light-ray—and the scientist directing the course of these rays, altering their direction at will.

If all this seems rather far-fetched, we should perhaps turn to a more convincing Utopian vision: Khlebnikov's "Radio of the Future", which deals less with time than with the conquest of space. To a certain extent, it is a vision which has already come true, but it is remarkable that it should have been written as early as in 1921:

The Radio of the future—the main tree of consciousness—will open up a knowledge of countless tasks and will unite all mankind.

Around the Radio's central station, this iron palace, where clouds of wires stream out like strands of hair, there will surely be posted a skull and cross-bones with the familiar inscription: 'Danger!' For the slightest halt in the working of the Radio would produce a spiritual swoon of the entire country, a temporary loss of its consciousness.

The Radio becomes the spiritual sun of the country, the great sorcerer and ensorcerer.

Imagine the Radio's central station: A spider web of lines in the air, a cloud of lightning-flashes, now extinguishing themselves, now re-igniting, running from one end of the building to the other. A skyblue globule of circular lightning hovering in the air like a timid bird, tackle stretched obliquely.

Around the clock, from this point on the terrestrial sphere, flocks of news-items from the life of the spirit scatter like the spring flight of birds.

In this stream of lightning-birds, the spirit will prevail over force, good advice over intimidation.

1. SF V pp 239-40.
The activities of the artist of the pen and the artist of the brush, the discoveries of the artists of thought (Nechtikov, Einstein) suddenly transporting mankind to new shores...

The task of communing with the one soul of mankind, with the one quotidian spiritual wave which sweeps over the country every day, drenching it with a rain of scientific and artistic news—the Radio has accomplished this task with the aid of lightning.¹

Khlebnikov is already prophesying the invention of television. The Radio, he writes,

has sent coloured shadows out on its instruments, so that the whole country and every village can become a communicant in an exhibition of paintings from the distant capital. The exhibition is transmitted by impulses of light and is repeated in thousands of mirrors through all of the Radio's stations. If previously the Radio was the ears of the world, now it is the eyes which admit no distance.²

This is Khlebnikov's vision of "the conquest of space" in the future:

Proud skyscrapers plunging into the clouds, a game of chess between two people located at opposite ends of the globe, a lively conversation between a man in America and a man in Europe...

Thus the Radio will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse together all mankind.³

The sensation of existing in the form of a radio-wave—roaming freely over the spaces of the globe—is conveyed in the following poetic lines:

I am a wave, rolling down,
From the white brow of a mountain in Iran,
And reflected in black

¹. SP IV, pp 290-291.
². Ibid p 292.
³. Ibid p 293.
From the antennas—eyes of a lobster
As it runs obliquely to the side
While a wild-eyed maiden
Rides an ass...

I ran
Along a wave, cut
By a whale's tail,
And sea-jelly,
And Einstein's radio
About spectral suns...

I rose in the air
Like steam
Spiralling in a column
Like a white tree
A clean birch standing on the sea...

I tickled
An American air-pilot's
Coarse moustache,
And heard the wheel
Of the wagon of the skies in my ears...

And then, like a ray,
I flew to a star.
And there a wise man said:
Here's a fragment
Of an unknown star...¹

¹ SP V pp 101-02.
Chapter Fourteen:

THE CONTRACTIONS OF KHELENIOV—REAL OR IMAGINED?

The ground has now been prepared for a discussion of the main theme: the underlying logic connecting together the various aspects of Khlebnikov's thought and work. His love of the past is usually thought of as being inconsistent with his "futurism". This brief chapter simply presents this misconception without dealing with it in any depth; it will be answered in the chapters following.
THERE IS A VIEW among critics that Khlebnikov was a mass of contradictions. In many ways he was, as perhaps the preceding pages have helped to show. But the contradictions were in certain crucial respects not nearly so fundamental as is usually alleged.

The chief accusation made against Khlebnikov has usually been of an inconsistency between his primitivist poetic practice and his allegiance to "the future". Marinetti himself was one of the earliest to lay this charge, when he attacked Russian Futurism as "savagism", and asked, referring to Khlebnikov:

Why is this archaism necessary? Is it really capable of expressing the whole complexity of the tempo of contemporary life? ¹

A comparable remark of Chukovsky's—in which he points to the paradox of "futurists" who choose to write in pre-historic cries and screams—has already been cited.² The Soviet critic Gofman similarly concludes that

in founding his system of a 'universal language', and in transforming the language of poetry, Khlebnikov attempted to establish structural and semantic principles more characteristic of one of the ancient phases of the evolution of vocal speech than of 'the language of the future', no matter how this is conceived.³

And Renato Poggioli cannot understand why Khlebnikov thought of himself as a futurist at all:

Khlebnikov's Utopia is regressive and retrospective: it repudiates our own steel or iron age for a mythical age of gold, even for a stone or wooden age.⁴

2. Quoted in: ibid, p 95.
3. Iazykovye novatorstvo Khlebnikova, p 225.
Poggioli concludes, rather amazingly, that Khlebnikov's poetry has little to do with the movement to which he gave his allegiance.¹

Even Markov accepts the idea of the same contradiction, as when he writes:

Khlebnikov's work is built on a conflict between modernity (his thought) and the past (his poetry).²

For those who hold this view, Khlebnikov's enthusiastic espousal of "inventions", and particularly Radio, was a surface phenomenon, developed rather late in the poet's life, derived externally from the avant-garde milieu in which he mixed and having little to do with—and indeed conflicting with—the more deeply-rooted and original linguistic and poetic practice which was developed at an earlier stage.

In the present work an opposite view will be put forward. It is suggested that an important aspect of Khlebnikov's early linguistic practice was its character as a revolt against the forms and conventions of literacy. Far from conflicting with the poet's later espousal of Radio, it in a certain sense anticipated it. For if Radio really does mark, in a sense, the beginning of a new age of communication, then one of its important features is a certain transcendence over the written word—and a new emphasis on the primacy of the voice. In emphasizing the oral tradition of culture—the "song" as opposed to the "book"—Khlebnikov may have been helping to familiarize his contemporaries with the new oral emphasis which the age of Radio seemed to be promising.

¹ Loc cit.
² The Longer Poems, p v.
Chapter Fifteen:
THE ELECTRONICS REVOLUTION: McLuhan.

Khlebnikov's association of the electronic future with the pre-historic past is an idea which is also central to the theories of the 'media-philosopher' Marshall McLuhan. For McLuhan, the electronic future will be a 'return' to the pre-literate past in the sense that it will be an age, once again, of the spoken word. The primacy of writing, and of the culture of literacy, is destined to be overthrown by the age of Radio and TV.
ONE OF KHLEBNIKOV'S MANIFESTOS begins with a radio-call: "To all! To all! To all!"¹ There is a crucial point in Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" where a similar call is made:

Sandhias! Sandhias! Sandhias!
Calling all downs. Calling all downs to dayne. Array!
Surrection. Eire-weeker to the wohld bludyn world. O rally, O rally, O rally! Phlenxty, O rally! To what lifelike thyne of the bird can be.²

The Eastern note (the first thrice-repeated word is a chant from a Sanskrit prayer), the call to the "whole world", the idea of re-birth (the resurrection and the Phoenix) and the idea of mankind being able to live like a bird—all these show that the parallels with Khlebnikov are quite close. Marshall McLuhan thinks that

James Joyce's book is about the electrical retribalization of the West and the West's effect on the East...³

What he means is that "Finnegans Wake" is a sort of premonition of the end of literature, the end of the age of literacy, as Radio and electronic communications media threaten to supplant the familiar primacy in art and culture of the written word. The complete dominance in culture of the written word has been a largely Western fact: the cultures of the East have preserved more of their tribal, oral heritage. Hence the coming of Radio in a sense redresses the balance between East and West, inasmuch as it promises, on the one hand the superseding of the West's culture of literacy, and on the other an extraordinary new life on a global scale for a transformed version of the oral cultures of the East.⁴

1. SP V p 164.
2. Finnegans Wake, first lines of last chapter.
4. Ibid p 128.
It is not necessary to accept all of McLuhan's positions in order to concede that his views are of some importance to an understanding of much modern art. In his view, the habits and conventions of literacy have imposed their own assumptions on Western consciousness to a much greater degree than has been supposed. When communicating through writing, the individual senses his isolation, his separation in space from other "I's", to a much greater degree than when communication is through the spoken word. The emphasis which literacy places on the visual sense—to the exclusion of hearing and touch—again helps underline this spatial separateness, since it is the eye above all which permits the sense of perspective and orientates the individual in space. By placing a new emphasis on the ear, Radio tends to dissolve the sense of spatial separation. And, as McLuhan argues,

As visual space is superseded, we discover that there is no continuity or connectedness, let alone depth and perspective, in any of the other senses. The modern artist—in music, in painting, in poetry—has been patiently expounding this fact for some decades, insisting that we educate our long neglected senses of touch and taste and hearing.

In McLuhan's view, the 'return', by means of Radio, to a new form of oral culture similar in many respects to the pre-literate tribal cultures of the past—makes possible a transcendence of the spatial separateness which has been a characteristic of the literate "I":

An oral or tribal society has the means of stability far beyond anything possible to a visual or civilized and fragmented world. The oral and auditory are structured by a total and simultaneous field of relations describable as "acoustic space". Quite different is the visual world where special goals and points of view are natural and inevitable.

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1. Counter-Blasch, p 73: "With the book came silent, solitary reading".
3. Ibid p 23.
McLuhan's method is exaggeration. When he claims that "civilization is entirely the product of phonetic literacy"\(^1\), or that "the invention of Euclidean space is, itself, a direct result of the action of the phonetic alphabet on the human senses"\(^2\), one has to allow for the exaggeration in order to appreciate the element of truth in what he says. According to McLuhan, the invention of writing coincided with the appearance of the bureaucrat—and hence the state:

"A goose quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery, gave us enclosed space and towns, brought roads and armies and bureaucracies."\(^3\)

This new form of "language", in other words, had certain social or political correlates which were inherent in the language-form as such, regardless of what was actually being "said". This is what McLuhan means when he says "the medium is the message": in a long-term historical sense, written language always "says" the same thing, not by virtue of its content but by virtue of its form. No matter what was written on it, papyrus as such meant control and direction of armies at a distance from a central bureaucracy.\(^4\)

Literacy divorced men from the living web of social reciprocity; it gave men "the power to act without reacting."\(^5\) The "I" was no longer in a reciprocal relationship with other "I's"—it could now assert itself one-sidedly, bureaucratically, from above. On a less political level, writing meant a parallel "fossilization" of emotions and being:

"Writing meant that the acoustic world with its magic power over the being of things was arrested and banished to a humble sphere. Writing meant the power of fixing the flux of words and of thought."\(^6\)

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6. Counter-Blast, p 115.
But just as all this is what writing "says" (regardless of what might happen to be written), so oral language—and its resurrection in Radio—has a definite "message" of its own. In writing about Radio, McLuhan has a tendency to describe certain possibilities or potentialities as if they were already facts. Making all due allowances for this, however—and for his usual exaggeration—it seems that he has something important to say about the "message" which the electronic media may bring. McLuhan's relevance to a study of Khebnikov should be obvious:

By surpassing writing, we have regained our sensorial WHOLENESS, not on a national or cultural plane, but on a cosmic plane. We have evoked a super-civilized sub-primitive man.1

By restoring in a new form the oral cultures and priorities of the past, Radio brings a future which is also a kind of 'return' to the prehistoric past:

Bless the electric return to the tribal paleolithic age, to the world of the hunter!2

Or again:

We begin to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3,000 years of literacy divorced us.3

In that sense, we are back again in the beginning of the world:

Extensions of man are the hominization of the world. It is a 2nd phase of the original creation.4

Or, in another sense, it is the end of the world:

Just as history begins with writing, so it ends with TV.5

The basic fact of the new "language-form" is that it presupposes and in a sense creates a new awareness of unity:

We begin to realize the depth of our involvement in one another as a total human community.6

Or again:

1. Counter-Blast p 16.
2. Ibid p 45.
3. Ibid p 17.
4. Ibid p 34.
5. Ibid p 122.
Today, electronics and automation make mandatory that everybody adjust to the vast global environment as if it were his little home town.¹

In McLuhan's view, computers and electronics are destined to enable man to treat the entire globe almost as a work of art. Writing of the computer, for example, he states:

Its true function is to program and orchestrate terrestrial and galactic environments and energies in a harmonious way.²

He adds:

In merely terrestrial terms, programming the environment means, first of all, a kind of console for global thermostats to pattern all sensory life in a way conducive to comfort and happiness. Till now, only the artist has been permitted the opportunity to do this in the most puny fashion.³

Again, there is a 'return' to the pre-literate conception of art:

From the beginnings of literacy until now, art has mostly been thought of as representation, a kind of matching of inner and outer environments. Primitive man and post-literate man agree that art is making and that it affects the universe.⁴

This new art-form operates on a vast scale:

Technological art takes the whole earth and its population as its material, not as its form.⁵

And so a completely new role opens up for the artist:

The Ivory Tower becomes the Control Tower of Human Navigation.⁶

¹ War and Peace etc., p 11. In a reference, presumably, to the anti-war youth-movements of the 1960's, McLuhan says: "All our teen-agers are now tribal. That is, they recognize their total involvement in the human family regardless of their personal goals or backgrounds" — Counter-Blast, p 143.
² War and Peace etc., p 89.
³ Ibid p 90.
⁴ Ibid p 92.
⁵ Counter-Blast, p 53.
⁶ Counter-Blast, last words in book, p 144.
Chapter Sixteen:

KHLEBNIKOV: THE REVOLT AGAINST LITERACY.

McLuhan sees the essence of the electronics revolution as the overthrow of the cultural tradition of literacy. This chapter shows how Khlebnikov's work can be seen as in a sense anticipating or paralleling this overthrow in the realm of art.
IN AN EARLIER CHAPTER, the Russian concept of 'byt' was discussed. We noted Jakobson's remarks about the peculiarly Russian historical consciousness of the precarious reign of 'byt'—of fixed norms, conventions and order—over an ocean of chaos. And mention was made of the fact that a very similar consciousness was prevalent not only in Russia but throughout Europe in the immediate pre-war period in which Cubism was born.¹

Russian Futurism, we have seen, was in large part a revolt against 'byt'. The Sun in Mayakovsky's "Extraordinary Adventure" comes down from the sky and drives the fires back—"for the first time since creation". Everything in the Futurists' poetry seemed new, strange—reminiscent in part of what Khlebnikov called "those first days of life on earth", when mountains belched lava and there were three suns in the sky. Khlebnikov's word-creation was designed to make words sparkle with fresh life, in his own words, "as in the first days of creation". For both Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov, the age they were entering was a "second re-birth" of mankind.

For Kruchenykh, all previous art in Russia had consisted merely of

pitiful attempts on the part of servile thought to re-create its byt, its philosophy and its psychology...²

1. The poet Pierre Reverdy, an associate of the Cubists, writes that the year 1911 was a time "when the future was quite bare and the present unusually complex and precarious... I doubt if ever before in the history of art was there so much sunshine, so many blue skies, so much responsibility so bravely assumed, or so great a gap set between disaster and the hoped-for"—Une Aventure Methodique (1949), quoted in: John Russell, G Braque, London 1959 p 13.
Ever since the "Lay of Igor's Campaign" and the period of the byline, real word-art had fallen into disuse and everything was done to muffle the primeval feeling for the native language.¹

The word had become an automatic, mechanical, repetitive instrument of thought, while everything which connects it with its kinsmen and the springs of existence—is unnoticed.²

It was in a revolt against the reign of byt in language that Kruchenykh made such exaggerated statements as the more disorder we introduce into the construction of sentences—the better.³

* * * * *

We have noted that Khlebnikov championed Russia's "singers" as opposed to her "writers".⁴ He believed that "the song" and "the book" in Russia belonged in "different camps".⁵ He yearned for a "bonfire of books"⁶—and also for a "second language of songs."⁷ He described his word-creation technique as "the enemy of the bookish fossilization of language."⁸ Livshits praised Khlebnikov for "a discovery of language in its liquid state."⁹ Khlebnikov condemned "language borrowed from dusty libraries" as "alien, not one's own language".¹⁰ And he curiously associated the overthrow of this "bookish-fossilized" language—with the unification of mankind and the overthrow of all "states of space."¹¹

1. Ibid p 65.
3. Ibid p 68.
4. SP V p 182.
5. Loc cit.
6. SP V p 183.
8. Ibid p 233.
10. SP V p 223.
It is in its written form that language corresponds most closely to the conception of 'byt'. "Arrested or frozen speech", writes McLuhan, "is writing." It was therefore appropriate that Khlebnikov's poetic and linguistic practice—as a struggle against 'byt' in language—should have taken very largely the form of a revolt against the forms and conventions of literacy.

Joyce's language in *Finnegans Wake* has been described as that of pre-historic man—language as it was prior to the development of literacy. It has also been described as the language of childhood—of an age in the life of the individual before reading and writing have been learned. It is also, according to most critics, the language of the dreaming mind—or of those deeper layers of the consciousness which the conventions of literacy fail to reach. In all these cases—and there is no very sharp dividing line between them—the crucial point is that the language comes close to the ideal of "pure sound". These remarks apply to Khlebnikov to no less a degree.

"The main point in Futurist aesthetics", writes Krystyna Pomorska,

was the theory of the word from the aspect of sound, as the only material and theme of poetry.

The idea of Futurism as above all the championship of sound for its own sake would be a simplification, especially in relation to Khlebnikov. On the other hand, to contemporaries, this was largely the impression conveyed, particularly when the new poets were compared with their Symbolist predecessors. The Symbolists

1. *Counter-Blast*, p 63.
2. *Miller-Budnitskaya*, in: Denning, op cit p 657; Malcolm Muggeridge in: ibid p 684. L A G Strömg describes Joyce's method as a "technique of incantation"—ibid p 637. Rebecca West writes that Joyce's theory is "that if words are so handled as to recall meanings they had in the past we will go back into the experience of the race in these bygone phases"—ibid p 536. Marcel Brion sees an "Asiatic sense" in Joyce—428
3. A Lyner writes that reading the words of *Finnegans Wake* "gives us the pleasure that children get by just making sounds"—Denning, op cit p 588.
5. See: Max Eastman in: Denning, op cit p 490.
6. Pomorska, op cit p 78.
had been above all littérateurs, seeing themselves as the educated, cultured ones, living in the world of the written word.¹

But as Chukovsky wrote of Mayakovsky (perhaps in a sense misunderstanding him, but making an important point nevertheless):

It would be silly to call him a writer—his calling is not writing, but yelling. His medium isn't paper, but his own throat—which is natural for a poet of the revolution.²

Or again:

...he is the poet of thunder and lightning, roars and screeches; he is incapable of maintaining any sort of quiet.³

Khlebnikov personally was very quiet. Writing of an early public appearance of the Futurists in Moscow, Livshits recalls that

Khlebnikov

could not be allowed to mount the platform because of his weak voice and the hopeless "and so on" with which he broke up his recital after the first few lines, as if stressing the continuity of his verbal emanation.⁴

His speech—difficulties even in private have already been noted. If too much literacy creates an emphasized sense of the spatial and emotional isolation of the "I", then Khlebnikov embodied this condition in his own person to an unusual degree. The enormity of the task of penetrating space—of communicating—was for him no mere academic concept. It was a daunting and seemingly inescapable fact of his personal life. And it may be that it was precisely Khlebnikov's practical difficulties in verbally communicating that spurred his efforts to solve "the problem of communication"—leading to his stupendous output of solutions and answers on a theoretical plane. For all his personal quietness, in any event, the effect of Khlebnikov's linguistic experiments was to create a ringing awareness of the

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¹. The extreme "culturedness" and "literacy" of the Symbolists—and their frequent use of abstract nouns and French and other foreign words—removed them considerably from the native Russian folk-tradition in poetry and was associated with their "quietness". See especially G Donchin, op cit, for the "bookish" effect of the Symbolists' attempts to translate French Symbolist techniques directly into Russian (esp. pp 164-6).

². K Chukovsky, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky, in E J Brown op cit p 5C


⁴. Polutoroglazy Strelets, in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 64.
sound-waves of language. As a theoretician and as a poet, Khlebnikov was an inseparable part of that outburst of "thunder and lightning, roars and screeches" of which Chukovsky speaks. The apparently rough and elemental "loudness" and extraordinary sound-effects of Mayakovsky's verse stemmed in fact from an extremely sophisticated poetic technique, and the pioneer in the development of this technique was undoubtedly Khlebnikov.¹

In the view of Roman Jakobson, Khlebnikov's technique represented a carrying to its logical conclusion of a tendency essential to all poetic language:

It has been observed many times in the history of the poetry of all peoples and countries, that, as Tredyakovsky put it, for the poet "only sound" is important. The language of poetry strives to reach, as a final limit, the phonetic, or rather—to the extent that such a purpose may be present—the euphonic phrase—in other words, a trans-sense speech.²

However, in carrying this general tendency to its conclusion, Khlebnikov was at the same time breaking new ground. All poetry can perhaps in a sense be regarded as a use of language in a way which runs counter to the normal tendencies of literacy. All poetry is a kind of "song", harking back, in one way or another, to the tradition of folk-song. But Khlebnikov's poetry breaks with literacy to a quite unprecedented degree.

In our earlier survey of the Russian concept of 'byt', we noted the peculiar Russian experience of the "temporariness" of civilization, the precariousness of the "order" represented by a city such as St Petersburg, the sense of slippage, as if everything had been built—like St Petersburg—on a marsh. The fact is that civilization in Russia—and with it, a literate culture—had very shallow roots compared with its Western European counterparts. Even in the nineteenth century, and in the

¹ See Khardzhiev, Poeticheskaya Kultura Mayakovskogo, esp pp 97-103.
² Modern Russian Poetry, in: E J Brown, op cit p 82.
early decades of the twentieth, the culture-forms of literate civilization were familiar only to a relatively minuscule proportion of the population.

Some scholars would date Russian poetry only from Vasily Zhukovsky's translation of Gray's "Elegy". For this reason, the struggle of the oral against the written tradition in Russian culture has been more fierce and evident in recent times than in any West European country.

Literacy can be traced back in Russia to the introduction of Christianity in the ninth century by the missionaries from Byzantium. For centuries, literate culture was largely church culture: in a sense hostile, foreign, in a closed-in world of its own, set quite apart from the folk-culture of the Russian people. Mandel'stam writes that even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this hostile, foreign, Byzantine, priestly nature of the written language lived on in the literate culture and language of the intelligentsia. And this again is a reason why the struggle of the oral against the written language has lived on.¹ Mandel'stam sees the written tradition as not only alienated and hostile, but also as a precarious structure in Russia. And it is a structure which Khlebnikov, identifying with the pre-Byzantine, pre-literate folk-singers of old, blows sky-high:

Khlebnikov's language is as lay, as vernacular a language as if no monks, no Byzantium, no intelligentsia's culture had ever existed. It is an absolutely worldly and secular Russian language, heard for the first time since a written Russian culture has existed.²

¹ "The struggle of Russian, that is of the secular, unwritten speech, whose words have grown from domestic roots, the tongue of the lay people, against the written language of the monks, with their Church-Slavonic, hostile, Byzantine literacy—this struggle is still to be sensed"—O. Mandel'stam, Notes on Poetry, (1923), in: D Davie and A Livingstone (eds), Modern Judgements: Pasternak, London 1969, p 67.
² Ibid p 70.
Chapter Seventeen:

KHLEBNIKOV'S POETRY AS ANTI-LITERACY.

It is shown how many of the distinguishing characteristics of Khlebnikov's poetic practice constitute aspects of his struggle against the effects which the forms and conventions of literacy have upon language.
KHLEBNIKOV'S ANTI-LITERACY manifests itself in virtually all aspects of his poetic practice. We may see it in:

1. Khlebnikov's general reluctance to finish anything.
2. His repudiation of the dictionary.
3. His hostility to Moscow-standard Russian.
4. His attempts to reproduce or restore "pre-literate" language-forms (the language of children and pre-historic men).
5. His epic inclinations.
6. His hostility to the "fossilization" of language.
7. His championship of "transreason".
8. His emphasis on the voice.

These eight points may seem somewhat arbitrarily-chosen. In part they overlap with each other, and probably other relevant characteristics could be thought of. However they may provide a convenient framework for our discussion. It would be to go beyond the scope of this work to undertake any original or extensive analysis of Khlebnikov's language. All that is proposed is that a note be made of the essentials of what is involved in each of the above points.

I. Khlebnikov's general reluctance to finish anything.

There is an element of finality about words which have been written down. The spoken word floats away on the air as soon as it has been uttered—other words replace it, and these, too, may themselves be replaced. Spoken language is a continuous process, a liquid stream rather than a "thing". A body of written words is a "thing". If it is recalled that written language originates historically in connection with official or state purposes: to preserve laws, property-titles, monetary accounts
and so on, it will be appreciated how intrinsic to the nature of writing is its permanence, its fixity and its lack of ambiguity—as ideals if not always necessarily in practice. It would obviously seem absurd to sign an unfinished document, enforce a partly-written law or purchase an incomplete title to property. In other words there can be no question, in any of these cases, of dealing with a linguistic process. The written words must comprise a definite thing.¹

A finished "thing" is, almost invariably, what Khlebnikov's writing is not. Khlebnikov loved new beginnings—and hated endings. Mandel'stamm put it beautifully when he commented:

...each line is the beginning of a new poem.²

With Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov explicitly attacked the idea of finish and polish: in his view, true poets should write on their books: after reading, tear it up.³

Khlebnikov was so true to this impulse that he was incapable of correcting printers' proofs of his own work. As Mayakovsky explains:

You couldn't let him have anything to do with proofs: he would cross out everything completely and give you an entirely new text.⁴

Khardzhiev writes:

Khlebnikov felt that every verbal construction was a process, not an object.⁵

The activity of making sounds or communicating was the important thing, not the finished result. Writes Mayakovsky:

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1. In connection with all this, it would seem not accidental that in attacking "bookish" or "fossilized" language, Khlebnikov very often had the language of state officialdom and of commerce in mind. Khlebnikov thought of himself as leading "a troop of songs" into battle against the market-place"(see Mayakovsky's essay, V V Khlebnikov, in E J Brown, op cit p 86) See also his attack on street-signboard language (SP V p 225).
Khlebnikov never completed any extensive and finished poetic works. The apparent finished state of his published pieces is most often the work of his friends' hands. We chose from the pile of his discarded notebooks those that seemed most valuable to us and we published them.

When bringing something in for publication, Khlebnikov usually remarked, "If something isn't right, change it." When he recited his poems he would sometimes break off in the middle of a sentence and indicate simply "et cetera."¹

The idea of preserving his manuscripts apparently hardly occurred to Khlebnikov who, according to Sergey Gorodetsky, would give them to anyone who wanted them.² And even many of Khlebnikov's most "finished" extensive works are deliberately composed of seemingly unfinished fragments, like scattered pieces of mosaic. His Zangezi was constructed, in his own words,

...from independent pieces, each with its own god, its own faith, and its own code.³

His "Children of the Otter" was composed of equally independent fragments or, as he rather strangely termed them, "sails". A. Metchenko observed that "a mosaic quality is present even in Khlebnikov's larger works"⁴, while Petrovsky called the poet's work "a mosaic of his biography."⁵ Khlebnikov's love of unfinishedness, impermanence, transience and discontinuous movement was clearly the corollary of his dislike of everything which the act of writing typically does to language. Perhaps nothing says more of the "anti-literacy" of all this than the idea that poets should write on their books: "After reading, tear it up." No instruction could hit more surely at the central principle of literacy as such.

¹. Mayakovsky, VVV Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 83. Khlebnikov wrote to Kruchenykh in 1913: "A work, 'Vila', is being sent to you, unfinished. You may, if you like, cross out or omit something, or, if you find it necessary, make corrections"—quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 32.
³. SP II p 317.
⁴. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
2. Khlebnikov's repudiation of the dictionary.

The development of writing leads to a certain standardization of a language. The dictionary helps reduce the language to certain norms of spelling, pronunciation, grammar and so on. A large number of colloquialisms, regional variants, slang terms and so on are either ignored or set outside the normal bounds of the written language. In this sense, literacy becomes a limitation. Mandel'stam associates it with a small vocabulary, which is "a sign that the speaker does not trust his native soil, and dare not set his foot wherever he likes". The literate social strata dare not set foot outside the bounds of what is "literate" and "correct": Mandel'stam comments that the Russian Symbolists "have not more than five hundred words among them". He contrasts this with the "turbulent morphological flowering" of language in the hands of Khlebnikov, who multiplies roots, evolves new words out of existing ones and knows no limits to his vocabulary. Markov comments that "Khlebnikov's vocabulary is easily the richest in Russian literature." It is obvious that this is closely associated with the fact that Khlebnikov rarely if ever thought of using a dictionary, happily inventing his own words and meanings as he went along. In Khlebnikov's work, all dictionary-definitions, norms, literary correct usages and standards are either disregarded or challenged in some way.

3. His hostility to Moscow-standard Russian.

This point will be discussed in the next chapter: it is relevant to the theme of Khlebnikov's tendency to identify "bookish" language with the state, opposing both almost as if they were one and the same thing. We may note here, however, that most of the futurists were "provincials", whose anarchistic rebellion always included an element of revolt against the "correct" and "literary" linguistic norms historically set by Moscow in opposition to the regions. This was particularly the case with Khlebnikov, as mar-

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2. Loc cit.
3. Ibid p 68.
4. Russian Futurism, p 300.
kov points out in his "The Longer Poems".

4. His use of "pre-historic" and "child-like" language.

The childhood of the race and the childhood of the individ-
ual can both be seen as pre-literate stages of existence. A
wave of interest in what Nikolai Kulbin called "the art of
children and prehistoric men" accompanied the emergence of
"primitivism" in Russian art and—as we noted in Chapter
Five—it was largely as a poetic expression of this movement
that Russian Futurism (and particularly its "Khlebnikovian"
aspects) took shape. The generally "clumsy" and "illiterate"
impression created by Larionov's or Goncharova's paintings
was equally conveyed by much of Khlebnikov's language. Already
in 1908, as Markov mentions, Khlebnikov was (e.g. in his
ballad "Lyubovnik Yunony") rendering child-like effects
through the use of stylistic and grammatical errors. Pomorska
cites the poet's "Komu skazatenski" (written a year or two
later) in a similar context, and remarks that children's
language was a source for Khlebnikov's gaum. In 1913, Khleb-
nikov insisted that the editors of Sadok Sudei II print two
poems by a thirteen-year-old Ukrainian girl, Militsa, with-
drawing one of his own poems to give her space. Khlebnikov
was fascinated by the way in which literate language could
be rendered illiterate—or by the way in which literature
is distorted and transformed when children or uneducated
people attempt to copy it. His use of folk-lore, as Markov
explains, is

not the "respectable" imitation of, or use of motifs
from folk epics, lyrical songs, and fairy tales which
is so widespread in Russian literature. It is, instead,
an interest in the naive and "illiterate" imitation and
distortion of literature, especially of romantic poetry,
in numerous songs, ballads and poems which seldom
attracted the attention of scholars, who to this day
tend to dismiss them as having no artistic merit.

The implications in terms of Khlebnikov's "anti-literacy"
need no further elaboration.

1. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 35.
3. Pomorska, op cit p 100.
5. Ibid p 36.
5. His epic inclinations.

The classic study of this aspect of Khlebnikov's style is, of course, Markov's "The Longer Poems." Khlebnikov's "epic" inclinations are shown in a number of characteristics which are reminiscent of the "Igor Tale", the Russian byliny and the Homeric tales. In keeping with the generally anonymous, oral collective or tribal origins and mode of existence of the great epic tales, the individualistic "I"-standpoint is generally lacking in epic poetry. Markov points to the same absence of an "I"-standpoint in Khlebnikov as one of the two basic "epic" features of his work.\(^1\) The second such feature, for Markov, is the "mosaic" quality discussed above. The era of Symbolism, Markov notes, "brought the writing of long poems to a virtual standstill."\(^2\) Most of the Symbolists' poems were short, highly-polished and finished expressions of a unified mood or theme. Khlebnikov yearned for works of immense size, and so could only regard shorter pieces as fragments of some larger unfinished whole. Jakobson notes that even

his small poems create an impression of epic fragments, and Khlebnikov, without any effort, frequently integrated them into a larger poem.\(^3\)

N. Gumilyev made a similar point in 1914:

Many of his lines seem to be fragments of a never-written epic.\(^4\)

And Sir Maurice Bowra wrote of "broken epics by Khlebnikov".\(^5\) There is no need to summarise Markov's study here. It will suffice if we note that the great epics were orally composed and transmitted, and in his epic tendencies, as in so many other respects, Khlebnikov was returning to the traditions of a pre-literate cultural era.

\(^1\) Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
\(^2\) Ibid p 36.
\(^3\) Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
\(^4\) Quoted by Markov, loc cit.
\(^5\) Quoted by Markov, loc cit.
6. His hostility to the "fossilization" of language.

In Chapter Six, Khlebnikov's efforts were interpreted as a struggle against 'byt' on the linguistic level—a struggle against what Jakobson called the "hardening" of the forms of language into a "stereotype". It is evident that it is in its written form that language is most likely to seem "hardened" in this way. The freezing or hardening of language seems to operate on two levels. Firstly, as we have noted, the development of writing tends to standardize a language, obliterating dialect distinctions and, it would seem, slowing down the process of linguistic evolution by providing points of reference or standards. Secondly, the freezing operates on the "microscopic" level, since each individual utterance, once written on paper, is in a sense preserved in a frozen state.

Khlebnikov fought against both these fossilizing tendencies. On the one hand, he insisted on re-animating the evolutionary movement of language, producing new words and meanings in accordance with the principles (as he saw them) of Russian linguistic development. This is what he meant when he wrote:

Poetry should be constructed according to the laws of Darwin.  

Mandel'stam writes of Khlebnikov:

He has plotted the transitional, intermediate paths in the development of the language, paths that historically it never took; they are taken solely in Khlebnikov, and made firm in his zaum, which is nothing other than those transitional forms which have not had time to acquire the crust of meaning that a rightly and justly developing language acquires.  

1. SP V p 270.
2. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone, (eds), op. cit., p 70. The translation here uses the word 'metalogy', which I have changed back to the Russian zaum. Compare Mandel'stam's comment with Arnold Bennett's on Joyce: "He has obviously had a vision of the possible evolution of the English tongue", Evening Standard, Aug. 8 1929; in Denning, op cit p 494.
On the other hand, as we have seen, Khlebnikov could relate to language only as a process, not as a finished thing. The very act of writing things down seemed to destroy his purpose, fixing and finishing the process which he sought to present in its continuous genesis and life. Oral language constantly emanates from the future; but the lustre is lost as writing fixes it in the present and past:

When I noticed how old lines suddenly grew dull as their hidden content became that of the present day, I understood that the native land of creation is the future. It is from there that the wind of the word-gods blows.¹

After a while, having been committed to paper, even the most magical-seeming word-forms began to lose their magic effect. Khlebnikov gives an example:

During the time they were being written, the transrational words of the dying Ekhmaten, "Manch, manch!" from Ka, almost caused pain; I could not read them, seeing lightning between them and myself; now they are nothing to me. Why, I don't know myself.²

Despite such feelings of failure, however, Khlebnikov was astonishingly successful in creating a sense of continuous genesis and movement in language even in its written form. Confronted for the first time by a mass of Khlebnikov's manuscripts, Benedict Livshits was overcome by a peculiar sensation, as if the anchors of his existence were being removed. The two aspects of Khlebnikov's "de-fossilization" of language are well indicated in Livshits' account of his feelings:

...the whole of my being seemed riveted by an apocalyptic horror. If the dolomites, purples and slates of a mountain range in the Caucasus suddenly came alive before my eyes and—in the flaura and fauna of the mesozoic era—had stepped up to me from all sides, it would not have created a stronger impression.

For I saw with my own eyes animated language.³

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From one standpoint, reading Livshits' words, it might be wondered what is so peculiar about "animated language"? One may often speak of "animated conversation", and to describe the result as "animated language" would not seem far-fetched or very much out of the ordinary. But, of course, Livshits was looking at manuscripts. In its written form, language is not expected to be animated. The feelings which can be experienced when it is—feelings which Livshits describes—indicate something of the scale and the nature of Khlebnikov's peculiar achievement.

7. His championship of "transreason".

Human language has an "arbitrariness" about it which distinguishes it from the cries, screams, barks and other forms of communication characteristic of the animal world. In human language, there is no necessary relation between a given sound and a given meaning—the connection is determined by social convention alone. This is not true in the animal world: a cat's purr or a gibbon's howl conveys the same message in the case of all cats and all gibbons of the same genus, being determined biologically rather than socially.

Khlebnikov's "transrational" principles assume that nothing in human language is arbitrary. Every sound has an intrinsic meaning which can be traced back to the Stone Age and is universal to humanity as a species. The parallel with forms of communication in the animal world is evident. That Khlebnikov was to an extent conscious of this parallel is shown by the fact that he treated real or imaginary animal cries in his poetry as examples of "transreason."

The lack of any necessary or unalterable connection between sound and meaning is in a sense as much a characteristic of human language in its oral form as in its written state. On the other hand, there is a kind of "animal" or "biological"
substratum to language when it is spoken rather than written. Quaverings in the voice, alterations in pitch, breathing, stammering and so on can be heard, and such factors can convey states of feeling in a way which does tend to be universal to all humans, biologically-determined and in that sense "necessary" rather than "arbitrary". This aspect of language is normally lost when the spoken word is translated into writing. Yet it can be of considerable importance in the communication of emotions, being an essential ingredient of, for example, the song. In his "transrational language", Khlebnikov was interested in "uniting people", appealing over the head of "the government of intellect" direct to the "stormy people of feelings". He was attempting to bring to the fore those aspects of language which exert a direct or "magical" effect on the emotions and which are generally missing in the "fossilized" written word.

In oral language, then, the relation between sound and meaning seems more "necessary", less "arbitrary" than is the case with the written word. Khlebnikov in his "transrational" experiments takes the idea of a necessary sound-meaning correlation to extremes. He insists that the very material, the substance of "transrational language" is itself meaningful. As Yuri Tynyanov puts it,

for him no sound is uncoloured by meaning.²

More specifically, his "transrational language" is based on the idea that each consonant, as a sound, embodies a meaning which is inseparable from it. In actual fact, so far as language is distinctively human, this is not the case: the meaning of a consonant depends on its position in a word and varies according to convention. Although within a given language there may be a certain tendency to associate particular consonants with a number of consistent areas of meaning, in general each consonant is meaningless in and of itself.

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1. SP V p 225.
2. On Khlebnikov, in E.J. Brown, op cit p 95.
The point is, however, that the "meaninglessness" of individual consonants becomes fully apparent only with the development of the phonetic alphabet and literacy. For when language is known only as spoken language, there is no need to fragment the sound-flow into isolated "letters". The mind is conscious only of units which do possess meaning—whole words and sequences of words. It is as a result of phonetic literacy that language is thought of as consisting of letters of the alphabet—i.e. intrinsically meaningless units. Khlebnikov, in denying the meaninglessness of consonants, was repudiating an important characteristic of phonetic literacy which McLuhan describes as follows:

The phonetic alphabet is a unique technology. There have been many kinds of writing, pictographic and syllabic, but there is only one phonetic alphabet in which semantically meaningless letters are used to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds.¹

Khlebnikov's consonant-meaning tables and theories, then, were one more manifestation of his opposition to the principles and linguistic effects of phonetic literacy as such.

These considerations by no means exhaust the anti-literate implications of Khlebnikov's transrational language experiments. However, the relationship of his zaum to child-language, pre-historic language, magical incantations, oral language in general and Radio as a return to the primacy of the spoken word are all subjects dealt with elsewhere in this work.

8. **His emphasis on the voice.**

It is obvious that literacy diminishes the role of the voice in language. Virtually all commentators on Russian futurism have recognized in it an attempt to restore to language the

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1. Understanding Media, p 83. Not only his consonant-meaning theories in particular, but Khlebnikov's insistence on the inseparability of sound and meaning in general can be seen as incompatible with the premises of the phonetic alphabet, of which McLuhan writes: "It alone is based on the abstraction of the sound of words from the meaning of words"—Counter-Elaat, p 91.
ancient pre-eminence of sound, breath and the movement of the organs of the voice. Referring to Mayakovsky's rhythms, Chukovsky writes that they are:

those we hear in the marketplace, on trolley cars, at meetings, the rhythm of shouts, conversations, speeches, squabbles, agitators' exhortations, swearing.¹

In the manifesto (Sadok Sudei II) containing the Ukrainian girl's poems a similar claim was made for Khlebnikov's rhythms:

We have smashed rhythms. Khlebnikov has introduced the poetic cadence of the living conversational word.²

Yuri Tynyanov writes of Khlebnikov's verse that it is modern man's intimate language, given as though accidentally overheard.³

Khardzhiev details Khlebnikov's frequent use of conversational free verse, showing its close relationship to much of the poetry of Mayakovsky.⁴

All of this, however, taken in isolation might give an inaccurate impression of Khlebnikov's own language. It was by no means his primary intention to give at all times a realistic rendering of conversational or colloquial Russian. His language is based only in part on the contemporary colloquial word. Equally important is its basis in the oral tradition of the Russian folk-epic and song, as has been noted. Moreover, Khlebnikov in many of his experiments was attempting to convey not so much a "tape-recording" of everyday colloquial language as the underlying patterns in accordance with which the sound-combinations of speech evolve and arrange themselves. Often he was so successful that the res-

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¹. K. Chukovsky, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky, in E.J.Brown op cit p 50.
². Quoted by Khardzhiev, op cit p 104.
ults sounded more Russian than Russian itself. Thus Mayakovsky was amazed when Khlebnikov produced about five hundred derivatives of the verb *lyubit* (to love), all of them, according to Mayakovsky,

absolutely accurate in their Russian construction, accurate and inevitable,

although strictly-speaking, of course, they were not "Russian" at all.¹

Writing about the language of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Max Eastman comments disparagingly that the reader experiences nothing of the author's inner life or mind through it. Asking (with reference to the author) "What is there that we experience in common with him?", Eastman replies:

*A kind of elementary tongue dance, a feeling of the willingness to perform it.*²

Other critics differ strongly, of course, but it would seem undeniable that this "tongue-dance" element, while not the only thing communicated by Joyce's language, represents one of its important characteristics. In Khlebnikov's "transrational language", this same element of tongue-dance, present to an extent in all poetry, likewise comes to the fore. Shklovsky even seems to see it as the main source of enjoyment in poetry in general:

In the enjoyment of the meaningless 'transrational word' the articulatory side, a sui generis dancing of the speech organs, causes most of the enjoyment which poetry brings.³

In many of his experimental lines, Khlebnikov took this tongue-dance (sometimes "tongue-twister") principle to extremest:

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1. Quoted by Khardzhiev, op cit p 97.
Or again:

Мы чаруемся и чураемся.
Там чаруясь, здесь чураясь,
То чурахарь, то чарахарь,
Здесь чуриль, там чариль...

and so on—there is no need to quote the poem in full.²

In learning to read, a child is taught to scan the lines more and more quickly, gradually eliminating the need to speak aloud or even to whisper inwardly. Efficient literacy is achieved when the words are "recognized" without delay, without movement of the lips or vocal organs and without being heard. If all that constitutes genuine reading, then the above lines of Khlebnikov cannot be "read" at all. The lines cannot be scanned, the eyes and mind are slowed down to a crawling pace and it becomes almost impossible to avoid precisely the practice which literacy is supposed to eliminate: namely, the practice of moving the tongue or lips, speaking in a whisper or aloud. Despite himself, the reader seems faced almost with a rebellion—a re-assertion of his long-suppressed babbling tendencies and childhood reading-habits—a temporary undoing of the work which years of literacy have achieved.

1. SP II p 44.
2. Ibid p 42.
Chapter Eighteen:

SOUND, TIME, LANGUAGE AND THE STATE.

The "political" implications of Khlebnikov's anti-literacy are discussed in terms which help show the underlying links between the various aspects of his world-view.

First, it is argued that his counterposition of a "state of time" to the existing "states of space" is consistent with his counterposition of oral language (arranged in temporal sequence) to writing (arranged in space).

Secondly, it is suggested that Khlebnikov's association of language-forms with state-forms is not devoid of a certain logic. Writing developed historically largely to meet new needs which emerged with the rise of the state. The state is a territorial unit (a "state of space"). To preserve fixed laws uniformly over wide areas of territory, a fixed, spatially arranged, durable and transportable language-form was needed. The written word, which met this need, may be thought to embody certain of the specific characteristics of the state as a historical form of social organization. In particular, its ideal of fixity can be seen as an expression of the state's ideal of the fixity of its laws and the permanence of its power.

Khlebnikov fought against this form of language—and saw his struggle against the "states of space" as a simple extension of that fight. The language to which he was opposed, Mendel's 'stam associates in particular with the state in its Russian form. According to Mendel's 'stam, the Symbolists' language was that of the Church and the State, while—in struggle against it—Khlebnikov's language represented "the terrible and boundless elements of the Russian language, not accommodating themselves to any state or church forms." This was one expression of the fact that Khlebnikov's Russian was the oral form, "heard for the first time since a written Russian culture has existed."

Opposing all "states of space" and harking back to the stateless, tribal past of Russia and mankind, Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts were directed towards restoring what he thought of as the archaic unity of the human race. But this restoration was to be accomplished through a revolution in which "inventions" such as Radio were to play a crucial part. The result would be a "state of time". Power would be in the hands no longer of the language-form and "reason" of the state, but of a transrational language of electronically-transmitted sounds, expressing the will of humanity and of "the starry sky".
"LIKE BLOK", writes Mandel'stam,

Khlebnikov thought of language as a state, but not at all one in space—not geographical—but in time.¹

Khlebnikov's idea of the "state of time", for all its apparent extraordinariness, does have a certain logic in terms of the struggle for the spoken word. It is a fairly elementary observation to note that spoken language is composed of elements related in a temporal sequence. Its dimension is time, while (since the words, ideally, exist "everywhere at once") it has no real spatial position or dimensions at all. The ideal dimensions of written language are just the opposite. The whole point of written language is that it is permanent: its elements exist in a durable form, related to each other not in time but in space.²

The association of writing with the territorial state is also not without foundation. In a small tribal village, there is no real "space": space is being penetrated instantaneously and continuously by voices, and people respond to each other simultaneously and reciprocally almost all the time. Obviously, this is never entirely the case: voices do not carry very far, and there is always plenty of travelling and moving about. But to the extent that "space" as civilized man experiences it does not exist, it would perhaps not be too far-fetched to call such a village a little "state of time". This is not the place

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2. El Lissitzky: "...we have two dimensions for the word. As a sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space"—Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 357. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: "An aesthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented in time, what is visible is presented in space"—A Portrait of the Artist, quoted in A W Litz, The Art of James Joyce, London 1961, p 55.
for a historical analysis of the origins of the world's various systems of writing. But we may at least note the fact that the written word arises historically to meet the needs of the state. For the territorial state, the penetration of distances is a real problem. Since there can be no instantaneous communication over such spaces, the problem can only be solved by a durable, changeless form of language which is the same when it arrives at its destination as it was at its point of departure. The written word on papyrus—which is not only durable but transportable—was for long the best answer to this problem.¹ The changelessness or durability of writing is a feature not only of this communications-medium. It also becomes, from the beginning, a fundamental principle of the state itself, expressed in the fixity of its laws, its property-relationships and so on (all of which must be recorded in writing). The ideal of fixity is, of course, never fully achieved. If it were to be, then nothing would ever happen. All life would take place in a process of endlessly-repeated obedience to pre-existing laws and written words. It would be the reign of 'byt' carried to its ultimate extreme. But although this ideal is never actually reached—conflicts always break out, laws have to be re-written and so on—to the extent that changelessness is achieved, time in a sense ceases to exist. And to that extent, the state is a pure "state of space".

Khlebnikov's language, we have seen, evolved in a process of continuation of—and reaction against—the language-use of the Symbolists. In a discussion of Khlebnikov's language, Osip Mandel'stam describes Blok's language as "the language of the state."² In his view it is a classic expression of that 'liter-

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¹ McLuhan cites The Bias of Communication by Harold Innis in this connection. War and Peace etc., p 26.
acy' in Russian history against which Khlebnikov rebelled. Blok's language, says Mandel'stam, is priestly, foreign. Its origins can be traced back to the Byzantine introduction of Christianity into Russia and the origins of the Muscovite state. It imposes itself externally against the multiplicity of provincialisms and oral traditions of real Russian culture, blotting them out and in a sense harking back thereby to the founding of the Russian state. Blok's tendency to centralize verse and language reminds one of the flair for statesmanship of the Moscow historic activists. It is a strong, stern hand in relation to provincialism of any kind: everything is subordinated to Moscow—that is, in this case, to the historically-conditioned poetry of the traditional language of the state official.  

To Mandel'stam, this intimate association of language and state is an aspect of literacy, and is therefore particularly characteristic of the West. In his view, the cultures and histories of the West lock up the language from outside, enclose it with walls of state and church, and saturate themselves with it...  

But Russia stands on the Eastern outposts of Europe, where literacy has a far shallower foothold:

Russian culture and history is washed and encircled on all sides by the terrible and boundless elements of the Russian language, not accommodating themselves to any state or church forms.  

Russian Futurism represents the invasion of these "terrible and boundless elements" which have been kept at bay for so long:

Futurism is expressed all in regionalisms, in provincial militancy, in a folkloristic, ethnographical multiplicity of tongues.  

1. Burya i Natisk, ibid p 390.
2. О природе слова, in: ibid p 287.
3. Loc cit.
The real Russian elemental language had always been represented by Russia's first and greatest epic poem—

the living, graphic speech of the 'Lay of Igor's Campaign', through and through secular, temporal and Russian at every turn...1

And when Velimir Khlebnikov, concludes Mandel'stamm,

a contemporary Russian writer, plunges us into that same thicket of Russian word-roots, into that etymological night, kind to the heart and intellect of the wise reader, there lives that same Russian literature, the literature of the 'Lay of Igor's Campaign'.2

Mandel'stamm's position, then, is that Khlebnikov's struggle was against a language-form that was written, priestly, foreign, centralized and intimately associated with the functions of the state. Khlebnikov's own language was anti-literate, secular, through-and-through Russian, decentralized and inimical to the existence of the state. This analysis is central to an understanding of Khlebnikov, and is confirmed by many of Khlebnikov's own statements, as well as in his poetry.

Khlebnikov wanted to inhabit a state of sounds:

We are going to the sounds inhabited by people.  
A town of logs of sound,  
A town of stones of sound,  
There I lead you  
To the town whose food you can hear,  
The town where people eat sounds, let us go,  
Where there are logs of sound,  
Logs of laughter,  
And streets of song...

Enough of idly strumming  
Strings with one's hand;  
Enough of catching and clinging  
To the sounds, hungry-eared,  
To listen to them.  
It is time mankind inhabited  
The state of sounds.3

1. O Prirodе Slova, ibid p 287.  
2. Loc cit.  
3. SP V pp 88-89.
The entire Earth was to be treated as a kind of vibrating musical instrument:

Treat the Earth as a resonant plate, and its capital cities as dust nodules gathered in still waves.¹

Khlebnikov saw the future as a return, on a new technological basis, to the tribal or stateless condition of man's past. He anticipated by half a century McLuhan's idea of "an electric return to the tribal paleolithic age":

You will recall that a resonant string of tribes has joined together Tokyo, Moscow and Singapore.²

He saw the events of his age as a sudden "shift" from the pre-historic past to the electronic future, a difficult movement like a jump across railway-points—and a movement which it was the task of his world government to guide. As he wrote in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" early in 1917:

Our heavy task is to be railway-pointsmen at the junction of Past and Future.³

The "shift" to be engineered was a kind of short-circuit of the historical process: a sudden meeting of the two ends of time, through a by-passing or telescoping of the events of the intervening period, so that it was almost as if the entire history of literacy and the civilized state had (to quote Mandel'stam) "never existed".⁴

A feeling that "the ends of time" are being joined permeates almost all Khlebnikov's work. The whole history of the human race is as it were "telescoped" and seen as if "in a flash", the most diverse periods being almost violently juxtaposed.⁵ Per-

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1. SP V p 161.
2. SP V p 313.
3. SP V p 163.
5. Exactly this feature is noted by S Gilbert in Finnegans Wake: "the dimensions of time and space are telescoped and we see, like gods or as in a dream, all history in the flash of a moment"—Denning op cit p 539. Joyce, too, joins the ends of time: he "chews thoughts of the beginning and the end of creation"—Unsigned Notice, Times Lit. Supp't., 25.1. 1941; Denning, op cit p 753. J P Bishop writes that in Finnegans Wake "is the past and the future of mankind"—ibid p 738.
haps the best example is provided by "The Otter's Children", in which, (among other things), a mammoth-hunt is juxtaposed with a Futurist public stage-performance.¹ This work, composed of "sails" each of which represents a fragment of life from a different age, was the one which came, perhaps, closest to realizing Khlebnikov's dream (noted earlier) of creating a novel which broke through the normal laws of time.²

For Khlebnikov, the events of 1917 were, then, an abrupt unifying of far-removed times—the future and the prehistoric past. Hence in his poetic works, the revolution, besides being pictured as a leap into the future, was depicted, (as one critic has put it),

as a breaking in of the primeval world, as a new bubbling forth of the prehistoric springs of life.³

In this way, the culture of literacy and the "states of space" were seen as being attacked from both ends. The rule of "the present" was being attacked by the combined forces of past and future.

For Khlebnikov, this meant that the "conception of time" was gaining the upper hand over "the conception of space." The present—insofar as it was a manifestation of changelessness and 'byt'—had been a frozen, static world, a world of territorial states and of existence in space. Its language—form had been "bookish" or "fossilized" or "congealed" language—made of "words no longer beating with the waves of language"—which divided people territorially from each other. Such language (whose words

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1. Choix de Poemes, p 110.
3. Holthusen, Twentieth Century Russian Literature, N Y 1972, p 78
   Although Khlebnikov was probably not aware of it, something similar was also the view of the Bolsheviks and of Marx and Engels. See the draft of Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich, where (in a discussion on a survival of "primitive communism"—the primitive Russian peasant commune) he wrote: "To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian revolution" and described the conditions under which "this commune will soon become an element that regenerates Russian society"—D McLellan, The Thought of K Marx, London 1971, p 137. See also Engels: Anti-Dühring, Foreign Languages Publishing Hse., M 1959, esp. p 477 and Lenin: Philosophical Notebooks, Coll. Works M 1961 Vol 38, esp. p 222.
were "died-out" and "non-existent") had been made for "suicides and cripples". It did not serve to penetrate or conquer the distances and spaces separating people from one another, but, on the contrary, enormously increased them:

Who would travel from Moscow to Kiev via New York? And yet is there one line of contemporary bookish language which is free of such detours?

But with the development of "the study of lightning", the coming of "radio-telegraph" and "Radio", the "language of lightning" and the "gift of spark-speech"—technological inventions which Khlebnikov's sound-experiments and "trans-rational language" were designed to match—communication could take place "in the twinkling of an eye." Inventors—people who accelerated the historical time-flow, people who hungered and fought for time—could begin to challenge proprietors or acquirers—people who froze the time-flow, people who owned landed estates, who defended "frontiers" and hungered only for the parcelled-out spaces of the Terrestrial Sphere. These spaces were now being shot through and through by "people-rays". Futurists communicating by radio-telegraph planned to occupy the estates of "people of space" and encircle the globe like waves. The ground was being pulled—literally—from under the feet of the "people of space". For 'all the world's space was being shrunk into a tiny ball:

Nobody will deny that I carry your terrestrial globe on the little finger of my hand.

Consequently, terrestrial ownership or "property" was becoming an absurdity, an impossibility. The right to space was being

1. Neizd P p 437. Khlebnikov's lines about "suicides and cripples", written in 1912, are paralleled in Mayakovsky's first play, "Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy", whose premier was held on December 2, 1913. Here a "chorus of cripples" plays an important role, as does the theme of suicide. See: Stahlerberger, op cit, Chapter One (pp 20-43).
2. SP V p 228.
3. Slovo Kak Takovoe.
4. SP IV p 114. Khlebnikov is here anticipating McLuhan's "Global Village" slogan; but of course it was also in a sense anticipated by Apollinaire and others (see above, chapter Seven).
undermined and replaced by something else. Khlebnikov "foresaw" all this, as he wrote in 1916:

I foresaw the destruction of the right to property. Space is conquered, and the grass of spaces wilts. The right to property is changed to the creative battle for time.¹

* * * * *

"If we sit and talk in a dark room", writes McLuhan, words suddenly acquire new meanings and different textures... All those gestural qualities that the printed page strips from language come back in the dark, and on the radio.²

In Khlebnikov's "state of sounds", in accordance with the corresponding emphasis on the ear as opposed to the eye, everything is in a sense "dark", although it is a darkness in which the stars shine, and the kind of darkness associated with evening fire-light and songs. Khlebnikov links many things with this vibrant darkness: it is the "star-world", it is the world of night-time and of dreams, it is the world of the pre-historic past and also of the future. All of these are in a sense one, and they all meet in the idea of "transreason", which corresponds to the deeper, more primitive, more essential and universal layers of consciousness or of the subconscious mind, as opposed to the every-day rational or "daylight" layers.

In agreement with McLuhan's comment on the "new meanings" of words which emerge in the dark, Khlebnikov argues that a kind of "darkness" is required if the "transrational" meanings of words are to be brought out and experienced. The word, he writes, has a double aspect:

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1. The word for "property" Khlebnikov uses here is imenie—"estate" or "landed property"—which thus in itself incorporates the idea of ownership of space or territory:

"Я провидел перелом права имения. Пространство завоевано, и права пространств завянет. Право имения перейдет на творческий бой за время." —SP V p 132.

2. Understanding Media, p 303.
One could think of its daily sunlit sense concealing a nocturnal, starry one underneath. For the everyday meaning of the word—whatever it is—blots out its other meanings, which disappear just as the stars of the night vanish in daytime.

However, in sleep and drowsiness, when the demands of daily business and the intellect relent, these "star-world" meanings re-assert themselves:

...life's night allows one to see the weak meanings of words as one sees the weak visions of the nighttime. 2

In Chapter Nine, the "pole of incomprehensibility" in the idea of "transrational language" was associated with the "objectlessness" of Cubist painting, the "reduction to zero" of art, the idea of the Bolshevik revolution and the idea of the semantic incompatibility of the "languages" of the future and present. The incomprehensibility of the "language of the future" emphasized the gap separating this future from the present world. Khlebnikov's "transrational language", we noted, was often supposed to be the language of animals and children, and these—like prehistoric men—represent realms of experience more or less incomprehensible to the literate civilization to which Khlebnikov was opposed.

Now if it is accepted that the instincts (men's link with the animal world), the ways of childhood and (perhaps) some of the thought-processes of primitive man re-appear to a certain extent in dreams, it needs no special insight to grasp how for Khlebnikov the language of "transreason" became associated also with the language of dreams. The world of dreams is a world of darkness beyond reach, by and large, of the state. As the mind slips into a dream, the "sunlit" and "rational" world—the world of literacy, logic, everyday business and officialdom—is reduced to zero. In its place there opens up a new world of freedom from the dimensions of time and space.

1. SP V p 229.
2. Ibid p 230.
If the world of dreams lies beyond the reach of literacy and the state, the opposite is the case in relation to the "governing" layers of the mind. Khlebnikov sees the "sunlit" or "rational", everyday or literate layers of language and consciousness as "ruling over" the starry, transrational layers just as governments rule over people. His "transrational language" is designed to reach the "people" as if "over the heads" of the "government":

If one may distinguish, within the soul, the government of intellect from the stormy people of feelings, then charms and transrational language are an appeal over the head of the government straight to the people of feelings, a direct call to the twilight regions of the soul or the highest point of popular sovereignty in the life of the word...¹

This, of course, throws important new light on Mandel'stam's comment that Khlebnikov sees language as a state. Two kinds of state are involved—as Mandel'stam pointed out. But Khlebnikov sees the struggle between these two as in a curious way paralleling, on the one hand, the conflict between peoples and governments, and, on the other, the conflict between the intellect and the deeper, "twilight" or "star-world" layers of the mind.

Under the conditions of "the present", Khlebnikov is aware, it is the governing or intellectual layers of the mind which have the upper hand. But this, for him, is precisely what is wrong with the world: these governing layers represent the rule of the "states of space". The language of these mental layers is not "self-governing". It is governed from outside, serving "reason" and hence the "governments" as opposed to the "people" of the Terrestrial Sphere. The way in which Khlebnikov derives his political conclusions from linguistic premises is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the following lines, written in 1913, where the poet explains the implications, for him, of the slogan of the "self-sufficient word":

¹. SP V p 225.
We teach: the word governs the brain, the brain—the hands, the hands—kingdoms. The bridge to a self-governing kingdom—is a self-governing speech.¹

Under the conditions of the present, self-sufficient language—the language of the "twilight" mental layers—is ruled by the "congealed", "bookish", "rational" language of the "daylight" waking mind. The "political" differences between these two forms of language have been noted already: one divides people, the other unites them; one corresponds to the "states of space", the other to the "state of time"; one corresponds to the world's "governments", the other to its "people"; one corresponds to "the present", the other to the future and the distant past. Another difference is suggested when Khlebnikov states his own preference as between these two forms or realms of existence of the word:

I would much rather  
Gaze at the stars  
Than sign a death-warrant...  
That is why I will never,  
Never,  
Be a ruler!²

The "bookish" language of "states of space" is also the language of the bureaucrat who inflicts death with his pen. A different scale of violence through language—the "historical violence" perpetrated over centuries against the entire continent and culture of Asia—seems to be what Khlebnikov tries to depict in another poem through an extraordinary extended metaphor. Here again the state is identified with language—in this case, with print—the inner ruptures and fissures through society being significantly "confused" with the effects on paper of the pressures of a printing press and its letters:

In that book you may turn pages  
Printed by the pressure of seas,  
Nations gleaming like inks in the night.

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¹. SP V p 188.  
². SP III p 297.
The execution of a Tsar forms an angry exclamation mark,
Or an army's victory, a comma.
In the margin are the dots of anger of the peoples' eyes,
Their rage unrestrained.
And a fissure through the centuries forms a bracket.¹

Khlebnikov believed that mankind had endured the warring,
violent language of the state for too long:

Too often has the pen of war been dipped into the ink-well
of mankind.²

Khlebnikov's idea that "bookish-fossilized", "rational"
language—linked with the state—serves to oppress mankind is
a notion which may not be quite so peculiar or far-fetched as
it at first may appear. To the extent that Khlebnikov's target
is literacy (and this is very largely the case, as we have
seen), the idea seems to approximate quite closely to the con-
clusion of the structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss,
that

the primary function of writing, as a means of communica-
tion, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human
beings.³

It was only with the invention of writing that the state and
bureaucracy could come into existence, and, in more recent
times, it has only been with the extension of literacy that
the state has been able to exert its control over each indivi-
dual citizen:

The struggle against illiteracy is indistinguishable, at
times, from the increased powers exerted over the individ-
ual citizen by the central authority.⁴

The fact that Khlebnikov often identifies what he calls "reason"
as the enemy does not lessen the relevance of this. McLuhan
reminds us that it is a general characteristic of thought in the
West that "we have confused reason with literacy..."⁵ And—

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1. SP III p 122. The translation here (unlike others in this
work) is a little 'loose' and simplified (the original begins
in the present tense and continues in the past).
2. SP V p 266.
4. Ibid p 293.
5. Understanding Media, p 15.
take the question of Khlebnikov's championship of the "We" as against the "I"-standpoint in language—this, too, may be consistent with his "anti-literacy". We have already noted how the written word allows a certain independence to the "I", isolating it from the more "normal" process of immediate reciprocity characteristic of language. Pomorska notes how the Formalist "Opozay" scholars based themselves in part on the work of Lev Shcherba, whose most important innovation in stylistic studies was his differentiation between oral style and written style. On the level of discourse, writes Pomorska,

these two different styles correspond to the structures of monologue and dialogue. Monologue is a tendency proper to a written style, whereas oral speech is primarily oriented towards dialogue.¹

This takes us back to our earlier discussion of Khlebnikov's break with the Symbolists. His revolt against his earlier "teachers" was not only a revolt against their excessive "literacy"—it was also a revolt against the way in which their "I" always "out-weighed" (as Mandel'stam put it) the "not-I". But if this tendency towards "monologue" is actually "proper to a written style", then the two things against which Khlebnikov was rebelling were in a sense one and the same. Over-literate language—"bookish-fossilized" or "rational" language as Khlebnikov called it—assumes the monologue rather than the dialogue as its form of discourse. Or, as Khlebnikov put it more simply, it "divides people".

The language which was to "unite people" was conceived by Khlebnikov in a number of rather different forms. In a passage quoted in chapter ten, Khlebnikov even conceived it as a "written language", whose "silent, graphic signs" would unite the multilinguals of humanity.² Khlebnikov seems very confused here, however, because in the same article ("Artists of the World") he makes it clear that what he is actually thinking of is his old idea of the universal meanings of consonant-sounds, which he represents with letters of the alphabet—i.e. with his

¹ Pomorska op cit p 17.
² SP V pp 216-17.
"silent graphic signs". He is thinking, as he puts it, of the "elementary particles of language—the sounds of the alphabet", and of the theory, developed by him, that "the first sound of a word is like the President of a society, directing all the multiplicity of the word's sounds."¹ It is clear that, for all his theoretical talk of a "silent" and "written" language, Khlebnikov is actually still haunted by his old and central obsession with a universal language of pure sounds.

In his 1915-1916 "propositions", Khlebnikov presented his "universal language" as a "language of numbers". After describing his proposal to assign numbers to all the world's thoughts, he writes:

That is the first international language.²

It seems here, however, that Khlebnikov is being a little ironical. The reduction of language to such a hum-drum, official "rational" form—a form deprived of sound-content and used only to communicate abstract concepts—was something which Khlebnikov deplored, and which he saw as far too characteristic of language already. Of his "language of numbers" idea, Khlebnikov writes

It has already been partially introduced in law-codes.³

He was referring to the procedures of case-law, where already it was possible to refer to a mass of legal precedents and "thoughts" without going through them all, simply referring to the cases in question. Khlebnikov thought that this ultra-"rational" use of language might as well be carried to its ultimate absurdity: assign numbers to all the world's thoughts, and to the great speeches made by Cicero, Cato and others in the past, and, forgetting about language, just hold up boards with the relevant numbers on them.⁴ This would ease the ears and save a lot of effort:

"Languages will remain for art and become free of their offensive burden. The ear is tired."⁵

¹ SP V p 219.
² Ibid p 158. ³ Loc cit. ⁴ Loc cit. ⁵ Loc cit.
The intended irony in all this is obvious.

What Khlebnikov opposed in language was precisely the tendency caricatured in his "language of numbers" idea: the use of language only to transmit ready-formed concepts, in such a way that nothing—neither the sounds of words, their associated emotional values or anything else—is actually experienced at all. This is what Khlebnikov meant when he wrote:

The desire to "rationally"—as opposed to transrationally—understand the word has led to the destruction of any artistic relationship with the word. I cite this by way of warning.¹

To Khlebnikov, a language capable of "uniting people" would have to penetrate beyond intellect to the realm of feelings.² It was inconceivable that a purely rational "language of numbers" could do this. That is why, in all Khlebnikov's work, the theme is returned to again and again that a transrational language will be necessary to unite the human race.

But there is yet another form in which Khlebnikov's "universal language" idea appears. This is the "gift of spark-speech", the "language of lightning"—the "Radio of the future". The idea of modern science and technology as "uniting mankind" was sometimes conceived in more general terms, as when Khlebnikov wrote:

The people's international we conceive through the international of the ideas of science.³

But, when it came to a specific invention, it was always Radio (or, earlier, radio-telegraphy) to which Khlebnikov most en-

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1. SP II p 10.
2. SP V p 225. See also ibid p 235: "Transrational language—means that which is beyond the limits of reason."
3. SP V p 265 (1921).
thusiastically turned. If Khlebnikov did not actually identify the "language of lightning" with his "transrational language", he certainly seemed to see parallels between the two. The Radio—like transrational language—was seen as exercising magical powers. It was a "great sorcerer and ensorcerer", enveloping the globe in its spell. The Radio was, secondly, the "main tree of consciousness." In this it resembled "the wisdom of language", which Khlebnikov saw as the single consciousness of the globe:

Its "I" coincides with the life of the world.¹

The Radio was, thirdly, like "a timid bird", its outpourings resembling "the spring flight of birds". Khlebnikov associated Radio with his dream of a humanity which would develop wings and fly: the "gift of spark-speech" was linked with "air-sailing." All this made Radio resemble transrational language in another way, for this new language, too, was associated with Khlebnikov's dream of a human race which could "fly". In Ladamir he calls:

Лети, созвездье человечье,
Все дальше, далее в простор,
И передней земли наречья
В единый смертных разговор.²

Conversely, man's existing system of languages—fossilized, violent and divisive—is seen as an evolutionary handicap. It is like the vestigial claw on the wing of a reptilian fossil-bird—a useless, burdensome survival from an aggressive past, weighing upon humanity's wings and hindering its flight:

Destruction of languages which resemble the claw on the wing... Languages on contemporary humanity—are the claw on the wing of birds: a useless residue of antiquity, a claw of former times.³

¹ SP V p 321.
² IS p 219.
³ SP V p 265.
As a source of magic, as the seat of the world's consciousness and as a means of spiritual "flight"—in these three forms, Radio was seen, then, as in a sense "paralleling" the functions of Khlebnikov's "transrational" or "universal" language. One could cite other parallels—the "instantaneous", space-conquering nature of the two communications-forms, their shared "oral" bias and so on. One could even refer to a certain "incomprehensibility" common to both, at least if McLuhan's remarks on the electronic media are to be believed:

Radio and TV aren't audio-visual aids to enhance or to popularize previous forms of experience. They are new languages...

It is easy to see now that language has always been a mass medium even as the new media are new languages having each its own unique grammar and aesthetic modes...

NOBODY yet knows the languages inherent in the new technological culture; we are all technological idiots in terms of the new situation.¹

Whether the "idiot" Khlebnikov was, in creating his "incomprehensible" language, sensing in some way this impending impact of Radio is perhaps an interesting thought, but we have no direct evidence that the poet himself consciously thought of the new media as incomprehensible languages.

However, perhaps the most important parallel which Khlebnikov saw between Radio and his linguistic projects was that both were to unite humanity. In 1920, as we have noted, Khlebnikov wrote of his "future language of the universe in embryo":

It alone can unite people.²

In 1921, however, he wrote that something else could."unite people". Almost as if his "universal language" were now unnecessary, he wrote that it was Radio which

will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse together all mankind.³

Clearly, he could only have said this if he had thought that the parallel between Radio-communications and his own linguistic

¹. Counter-Blast, pp 133, 84 and 16 respectively.
². SP V p 236.
³. SP IV p 293.
efforts was close.

Khlebnikov's vision of a "universal language" took, then, a number of different forms. Among these, however, some appear to have been less seriously-considered than others. Among these were the ultra-"rational" idea of a "language of numbers", and the notion—suggested in one passage of Khlebnikov's "Artists of the World"—of a universal language of "silent, graphic signs". In the overwhelming majority of Khlebnikov's statements on the subject, his "universal language" is identified with his "transrational" linguistic experiments, and in these the emphasis is on the "magic" and the supposedly intrinsic meaningfulness of sounds. The various attributes of Khlebnikov's "transrational language"—and of his language-use in general—can be interpreted, as we have seen, as in large part the embodiment of a revolt against literacy. This can be seen—as Mandel'stam suggests—as the central thrust of Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts, and in this we can see an important parallel with the effects of the invention of Radio, a parallel of which Khlebnikov was to a significant degree aware.

In opposing literacy—or in opposing a certain sort of language—Khlebnikov saw himself as opposing a certain kind of state, as we have seen. His "transrational" attempts were designed to secure a transfer of power—from governments to people, from intellect to feelings. Under existing circumstances, as Khlebnikov saw it, it was the daylight world, the world of everyday business, of the state and of the intellect—it was this world which held all real power. The "twilight" world or "star-world"—the world of childhood, of tribal man, of dreams and of the innermost realms of feeling—was suppressed, along with the Asian or primitive tribal areas of the globe and the peoples of the world. In this light, a large number of implications—psychological, historical, linguistic and geographical—were attached to Khlebnikov's "political" aim, which was, perhaps, the most fundamental of all his aims:
Accomplish by degrees a surrender of power to the starry sky...  

To Khlebnikov, to surrender power to "the starry sky" was equally to surrender it to "a self-governing speech". There was no contradiction, in other words, between his "starry sky" demand and his words, quoted earlier, about a "self-governing kingdom" ruled by a "self-governing speech". For the language of the star-world was, as we have seen, none other than Khlebnikov's "transrational language", the language of words in their "nocturnal, starry" sense. To surrender power to the starry sky meant, for Khlebnikov, to allow the world to be governed, as it were, "from within", in accordance with the inner will of humanity—a will (expressed in dreams and poetry alike) by which man is linked with his childhood, with his prehistoric ancestry and with his roots in the natural universe with its light-waves and stars. As one of his "Mask of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere", Khlebnikov listed the re-discovery of man's "white, glistening root", remarking that

in realizing mankind, it is necessary not to sever his ties in the universe and in the will, in which—as in a chalice—humanity was born.

Khlebnikov saw Radio as an instrument of this "will": it was humanity's "ears" and "eyes", and a manifestation of the "life of the spirit", as we have seen. Identifying "inventions" with his own poetic work, Khlebnikov saw the electronics revolution more generally as stemming from the inner world of the human spirit, while at the same time it returned "the light-ray" of humanity in a direct way into contact with the light-rays of the suns and stars of the universe. In this way the inner world of man's dreams was linked with the infinities of the universe, just as man's future was linked with his prehistoric or even cosmic past. The extremes of space—inner and outer—were joined, just as were the ends of time. A sense of these mind-boggling
connections is conveyed when Khlebnikov describes the "graph" (the "path of the point" along the graph-paper) of his "ray of fate", the ray which links everything with everything else, and which he calls "Gamma Budetlyanina".* The hostility of this ray to "states of space" (an inevitable incompatibility, since the ray's laws cut through states and connect everything, while the states divide people) adds yet another dimension to the complexity of Khlebnikov's thought:

It should be remembered that man is in the final analysis lightning, that there exists the great lightning of the human race—and the lightning of the earth. Is it surprising that people, even without knowing each other, should be connected one with the other by means of precise laws? ...Precise laws cut freely through states without noticing them, just as X-rays penetrate through muscles and give a picture of the bones: they strip mankind of the rags of state and give him another fabric—the starry sky...

To understand the will of the stars means to unfurl before the eyes all the scrolls of genuine freedom. They hang above us only in the black night, these boards of future laws, and don't the point's path follow this course in order to avoid the wire of states among the eternal stars and hearing of humanity? Let the will of the stars be wireless. One of the routes—is Gamma Budetlyanina, with one end stirring the sky and the other hidden in the throbings of the heart.¹

As the great "ray" is uncovered, writes Khlebnikov, human divisions and states vanish into nothingness:

...the conception of peoples and states disappears, and there remains a single humanity, all of whose points are harmoniously connected.²

This was written in 1920, but early in 1917—inspired by the outbreak of the February revolution—Khlebnikov, in his letter to Petnikov, had already put forward the basic ideas. The mission of the Futurists (or rather, of those who followed him among the Futurists) was, he had said, to replace states with a government of poets, territorial divisions with waves of sound embracing the globe, war and cannon-fire with the vibrations of strings. Some of this letter has been cited already, but a crucial passage was the following:

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¹ SP V pp 240, 241, 242-3.
² SP V p 242.
* "The Scale of the Futurist".
You know that the goal which has already crowned us, accomplishing by means of string play that which is now accomplished with cannon-fire, is to give to the star-world power over people...¹

¹ SP V p 313. Compare with Khlebnikov's words in "Our Foundations": "In front of you is a futurist with his 'balalaika'. Attached to its strings, the spectre of humanity vibrates. And the futurist plays: and it seems to him that international discord can be changed into the magic of strings." SP V p 240.
Chapter Nineteen:

A CHILD'S VIEW OF THE WORLD.

For Khlebnikov, life and art were inseparable. This chapter touches on this theme in order to show some of the ways in which the peculiarities of Khlebnikov's art also characterized him in his personal life. In particular, it is argued that not only did his poetic language often show "infantilist" features, but his methods of work and thought resembled the ways and the world-view of a child.
KHLEBNIKOV'S LIFE AND HIS WORK were inextricably intertwined. It is often difficult to distinguish between the typical features of his poetry and his habits and characteristics in every-day life.\textsuperscript{1}

The impression of inarticulateness created by much of Khlebnikov's poetic language was also created, as we have seen, by his speech-behaviour on a personal level. If his work seemed incomprehensible at times, then it was in this respect true to its author, who was psychologically largely incomprehensible to his friends\textsuperscript{2} and has been misunderstood by most literary critics ever since.

In his poetic imagination, the poet roamed freely across centuries.\textsuperscript{3} This was no merely literary stance—it reflected a real incapacity to accommodate himself to life in what he called that world and that century into which, by the grace of good providence, I have been thrown...\textsuperscript{4}

As Mandel'stam put it:

Khlebnikov does not know what a contemporary means. He is a citizen of all history, of the whole structure of language and poetry. He is an idiotic Einstein who cannot make out which is nearer, a railroad bridge or the Igorev Tale.\textsuperscript{5}

A parallel incapacity related to the dimensions of space.

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1. One facet of this "confusion" is captured by Petrovsky in his description of Khlebnikov's work as "a mosaic of his biography"—quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
2. Khlebnikov was aware of this. He wrote in 1914: "...now I know for sure that there is no one capable of understanding me except myself."—Neizr. P. p 371.
3. As Khlebnikov wrote of his alter-ego, Ka: "He finds no obstacles in time; Ka goes from dream to dream, intersecting time and achieving bronzes (the bronzes of time). He accommodates himself in the centuries as comfortably as in a rocking-chair. Isn't this the way the consciousness unites times together, like the armchair and the chairs of a drawing-room"—SP IV p 47.
In his dreams and in his art, Khlebnikov could not keep still. He flitted across Asia, around the globe and among the stars. The same incapacity to inhabit a given space afflicted him in his everyday life. Shortly before the War, he was seized by what his friends called a "hunger for space", and travelled up and down across Russia several times. It was a habit which stayed with him. His friend Spassky remarks that Khlebnikov

literally lived in train stations, getting off one train and waiting for another. ¹

We noted earlier Khlebnikov's demand for

the right to rooms in any town, and the right to change one's dwelling-place continually... the right to a home independently of the dimensions of space. ²

It was a demand which was obviously seriously—meant. Khlebnikov only wished that the trains in which he travelled could carry him through time as well as space. ³

Khlebnikov seemed somehow "primitivist" not only poetically but in his whole being. Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote:

He is like the author of the Slovo, who, by some miracle, continues to live in our age. ⁴

He was also "infantilist" or "child-like" not merely linguistically but as a person. Artyom Vesyoly has called him "a visionary with child's eyes", ⁵ while Korney Zelinsky refers to him as a poet who "became a child". ⁶ We have noted how the poet saw "meaning" in the most varied numbers and facts, and how he believed he could connect everything and foresee all. The child-psychologist Piaget remarks that it is an important (if often overlooked) fact that the child

conceives the world as more logical than it really is. This makes him believe it possible to connect everything and to

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¹. Mayakovskiy i ego sputniki, Leningrad, 1940, p 68.
². SF V p 159.
³. "It would be impossible to avoid destroying trains, if their movements were limited only to within space..."—SF V p 159.
⁵. Quoted by Markov, ibid p 23.
⁶. Quoted by Markov, ibid p 25.
foresee everything, and the assumptions which he makes are endowed in his eyes with a richness in possible deductions which our adult logic could never allow them to possess."

It is not difficult to see that Khlebnikov's "infantilism" was not merely an affectation, or a characteristic of his language in much of his work, but was an important characteristic of his thought-processes and world-view, too.2 This may be looked upon as an intellectual failing, even if it constituted an essential part of the charm of his work. On the other hand, it might possibly be argued that a child's mode of thought expresses a freshness, an emphasis on the will and even a degree of insight lacking in the more habit-formed, resigned and routine mind of the adult, and that an element of such "childishness" was essential in a poet who was to express some of the sense of newness and optimism of the years of revolution. In those years, after all, Khlebnikov was not the only one to believe in the possibility of inhabiting a more logical world and universe than mankind had experienced in the past.

1. Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child, London 1960, p 212. He continues, in words equally applicable to Khlebnikov: "...reality is for the child both more arbitrary and better regulated than for us. It is more arbitrary, because nothing is impossible, and nothing obeys causal laws. But whatever may happen, it can always be accounted for, for behind the most fantastic events which he believes in, the child will always discover motives which are sufficient to justify them; just as the world of the primitive races is peopled with a wealth of arbitrary intentions, but is devoid of chance."—loc cit.

2. The whole of Piaget's book, it seems, might almost have been written to describe the peculiarities of Khlebnikov's outlook and techniques. It discusses children's view of words as magic forces (p 3), and their tendency (p 149) "to find in every event and every sentence a hidden meaning of greater depth than that which is apparent..." Piaget writes of "the spontaneous etymology which children practise, or their astonishing propensity for verbalism, i.e. the imaginative interpretation of imperfectly understood words..."(p 149). Often, he writes, "the child seems to be on the look-out only for words resembling each other in sense or in sound" (p 157). Piaget relates (p 158) "the picking out of verbal and even punning resemblances" to the way in which the mind works in a dream.
Chapter Twenty:

KHLEBNIKOV, SCIENCE AND THE SPIRIT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION.

Khlebnikov was not a scientist, but his work was a reflection in art of the scientific revolution of his age. He was not in the normal sense a political revolutionary—and certainly no Marxist—yet in important respects his concepts and work paralleled and gave artistic expression to the spirit of the Russian Revolution.
TO PICTURE KHLEBNIKOV as living in a childish fantasy-world would be an over-simplification and, to an extent, a distortion. For he was also living in a technological future which, as we have seen, was really beginning to come into being. His "logic" may have shown infantilist features, but only in the sense that the child expects more control over events and more "logic" in the universe than there actually is. Whatever the defects of Khlebnikov's "scientific" methods, at the root of his efforts was a yearning for human mastery and a demand for precision and system which also characterized the scientific revolution of his age.

Khlebnikov was living in a childhood world and a world of dreams, as perhaps any artist must do to a certain extent. But there are different kinds of childishness, and different ways of living in dreams. Infantilism may be escapist, inward-looking and irresponsible, while "other-worldliness" may be dreamy, mystical, romantic or idle and passive. Khlebnikov was none of these things. Within his dream-world, the thrust of his efforts was directed towards will-power, system, definition, logical 'computation' and intellectual order—in other words, towards the very opposite of 'dreaminess' as normally understood. True, it was still all ultimately "dream": Khlebnikov's "science" (with the exception, perhaps, of some linguistic perceptions) was not scientific in any accepted sense of that term. But while other artists have dreamed dreams, there are not so many whose dreams have been dreams about science. An essential—perhaps the essential—feature of real science is the ability to distinguish fact from fantasy, and to subject results to some form of objective (experimental or other) test. Such an ability Khlebnikov almost wholly lacked. But, since Khlebnikov was an artist, the question
to be asked (if we are going to treat his work as a product of the scientific revolution of his age) is not whether his writings constituted science, but whether they expressed, from the subjective, human side, the experience of scientific mastery, the sensation of opening up new vistas of knowledge, and the optimism and hopes aroused by the discoveries of the new age. In the light of this question, as (it is hoped) the preceding pages have helped to show, Khlebnikov's works score perhaps more highly than any other literature of his time. Khlebnikov himself wrote of himself as "spending my days in a dream." But what he was dreaming of was—as we have seen—the scientific and mathematical ordering of human society, history and language, the elimination of irrationality and violence from human life and the final conquest by humankind of the forces controlling his destiny. It may have been an optimistic dream—perhaps childishly so. But it expressed an important part of the spirit of the age.

Even in working on his "transrational language", Khlebnikov's real purpose was a scientific one. After describing the way in which "transrational language" has, in his words, "a special power over the consciousness", Khlebnikov defines his isolation and listing of the intrinsic meanings of consonant—sounds as "a way of making transrational language rational." Khlebnikov did not subscribe to any philosophy of irrationalism—his aim was to bring what Jakobson called "the irrational structures of poetry" into the light of consciousness, so that they could be consciously mastered and used. Transrational language, in his view, had to become self-governing. Its ideal was to embody "the highest point of popular sovereignty in the life of the word..." The inner world, the world of feelings—the "stormy people" of the "state" of the mind—should become the "government", become a new "reason" on a higher plane. This was a very different ideal from the aim of repudiating and dispensing with "government" or "reason" of any kind.

1. SP II p 45.
2. SP V 235. Having defined the meaning of the sound "Ch", Khlebnikov declares: "And in this way, transrational language ceases to be transrational"—loc cit.
3. SP V p 225.
In the light of these considerations, Khlebnikov's "zaum" or "transreason" should be understood as representing an "ultra-rationalist" rather than "irrationalist" viewpoint. Perhaps "ultra-rationalist" is not the right word, but at least it may help emphasize the almost complete absence of obscurantism or mysticism in Khlebnikov's intentions. This point is essential to an understanding of Khlebnikov's work as one expression of an essential element in the spirit of the Russian Revolution.

To understand Khlebnikov, it is necessary to see how his work finds its own place in, and sheds light upon, the world he was living in—a world which in some respects is that in which we continue to live today. Khlebnikov may have seemed like a survivor from a pre-historic age, or like a visitor from the space-age future. These resemblances, however, do not alter the fact that he was a product of his age. The important thing is that the times he lived and wrote in were a strange and decisive turning-point in human history, and that the appearance of a meeting of past and future in a way characterized these revolutionary years no less than they characterized Khlebnikov himself.

Khlebnikov saw his own work as in a sense paralleling the work of the revolutionary workers of 1917. As he declared in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" early in that year:

We—are a special kind of weapon. Comrade workers, do not complain that we are going by a special route to the common goal. Every type of weapon has its own methods and laws... We are worker-architects (social-architects).

The ultra-rationalist, systematizing, sound-tabulating tendencies in Khlebnikov's work were carried further by other Futurist writers and theoreticians—and also (in a much more genuinely scientific way) by the 'Opozit' or "Formalist" critics.

1. "The intuitions 'uncovered' by Khlebnikov in the language of words—and in the 'language' of numbers, mathematics—have always a rationalist character in the final analysis. Khlebnikov does not repudiate 'the language of understanding' but in every way strives to reform it, 'sharpen' and 'enliven' it'... Khlebnikov's intuitivism, and the whole of his metaphysic of language has a rationalistic, logical character"—Gofman, op cit p 229.

2. SP V p 164.
whose attentions were centred upon the Futurists. In his "Our Foundations", Khlebnikov complained of the "harm" done by "unsuccessfully constructed words", blaming this on the fact "that there are no account-books kept of the expenditure of popular intellect" and that "there are no railway-engineers of language". It was just this "technologist" interest in the "nuts and bolts", as it were, of language which was thought of as characterizing Futurism in the post-revolutionary period. Khlebnikov's idea of constructing a "Mendeleyev's law" or "atomic table" of sound meanings was very much in tune with the revolutionary spirit of the times. The artists grouped around Mayakovsky's "Left Front of the Arts" liked to think of themselves as technicians, concerned with the real business—the brass tacks—of poetic creation, while others were concerned with sentiment, philosophy, religion or ideology—anything but language itself.

This extreme rationalist aspect of Futurism—which was to a large extent an extrapolation of Khlebnikov's linguistic experiments and tabulations—obviously had something in common with the "technologist", "rationalizing" and "planning" aims of the Bolshevik revolution. Leon Trotsky acknowledged this when he wrote:

Futurism is against mysticism, against the passive deification of nature, against the aristocratic and every other kind of laziness, against dreaminess, and against lachrymosity—and stands for technique, for scientific organization, for the machine, for planfulness, for will-power, for courage, for speed, for precision and for the new man, who is armed with all these things. The connection of the aesthetic 'revolt' with the moral and social revolt is direct...3

In Khlebnikov's case, the "parallel" with the social revolution was in some ways a more distant one than in the case of Mayakovsky and others. Khlebnikov's ideas and theories ran, in a sense, parallel with the revolution's aims, but they did so as if

1. SP V p 228.
2. Loc cit.
3. Literature and Revolution, p 145.
on a distant, different plane.

According to Malevich:

Cubism and Futurism were the revolutionary forms in art foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic life of 1917. Tatlin went so far as to declare:

The events of 1917 in the social field were already brought about in our art in 1914...2

Although in the early years of the Revolution, Futurism made a bid for recognition almost as the "official" school of art,3 the Bolshevik leaders themselves (where they were concerned at all with such questions) disputed such categorical claims. Leon Trotsky, however, while arguing that Futurism had not "mastered" the Revolution, conceded that it has an internal striving which, in a certain sense, is parallel to it.4

This was more than he was prepared to say for any other school of art.

The notion of Khlebnikov's work as expressing a "striving" running in a peculiar way "parallel" to the Russian Revolution is important to an understanding of the poet. We have already surveyed Khlebnikov's attempts to "anticipate" and "foresee" the events of history (conceived to be mathematically regular and measurable) by means of algebraic formulae. The "striving" or "impulse" behind these attempts, we have seen, was a determination to find order and meaning in the chaos of human affairs, and to subject the processes of history to the human intellect and will. It was a reaction against the historical passivity and gloomy fatalism of the Symbolists.

Now it does not need much special insight to see that this anti-Symbolist reaction, in itself, represented a striving running in a way parallel to one of the central themes of the October revolution. One has only to turn to a passage of Trotsky's

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2. Quoted by Gray, loc cit.
3. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p 111.
4. Ibid. p 112.
in which he describes (without in any way thinking of Khlebnikov) the "algebra of revolution"—the dialectical method—to see how close in a formal sense the parallel can appear to be:

In the arena visible to the external eye, are chaos and floods, formlessness and boundlessness. But it is a counted and measured chaos, whose successive stages are foreseen. The regularity of their succession is anticipated and enclosed in steel-like formulas. In elemental chaos there is an abyss of blindness. But clear-sightedness and vigilance exist in a directing politics. Revolutionary strategy is not formless like an element; it is finished like a mathematical formula. For the first time in history, we see the algebra of revolution in action.¹

It is difficult to imagine that Khlebnikov would have disagreed with a single word of the above—except that he would have seen the description as applying, not to the method of Marxism (in which he showed no interest) but to his own revolution-predicting "algebra". But for Trotsky, the idea of a revolutionary "algebra" is basically a metaphor, intended only to have an approximate relationship with reality. Writing of the "counted and measured" phases of history, he can hardly be thought to mean that the time-intervals between them are numerically-fixed. Describing the "regularity of succession" of these phases, he does not assume that they recur at fixed intervals of, say, 317 years. But Khlebnikov, as we have seen, does assume this. Extremist as he was, he might almost have been thought to have been deliberately caricaturing, exaggerating—carrying "to its logical conclusion"—the revolutionary dream of mastering fate and history by means of science. He took the idea of an "algebra of revolution" not metaphorically but in the most literal possible way. It was not deliberate caricature, however. The idea came to Khlebnikov long before 1917, as we have seen, and was taken in a deadly serious way, without his being aware of any parallels which seem to present themselves to us today. The coincidence seems strange—per-

¹ Literature and Revolution, p 104.
haps almost as strange as Khlebnikov's correct prediction of the revolution's date in 1912.

There also seems to be a certain relationship between Khlebnikov's ideas on time and the ideas of the Russian Revolution, although here again the parallel is in the main between conceptual forms rather than concrete ideas. We have seen that Khlebnikov sensed, apparently, a close relationship between the future and the prehistoric past. In place of the straight-line or linear conception of time, he believed he was establishing "a new attitude towards time" which taught "that distant points can be closer than two neighbouring ones..." 1 It does not need much knowledge of Marxism to perceive that there is a kind of "parallel" here similar to the one just described. Engels wrote of historical and natural evolution as a "spiral form of development" 2, and, writing of "primitive communism", defined it as the task of the social revolution "to restore common property on a higher plane of development..." 3 Lenin wrote in this connection of "the apparent return to the old", and of the "repetition" of lower evolutionary phases "at a higher stage". 4 In relation particularly to Russia, Marx, after describing the disintegration of the ancient peasant "mir" or commune, wrote in an un-sent letter to Zasulich:

To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian revolution...

And he went on to describe the circumstances under which "this commune will soon become an element that regenerates Russian society..." 5 It is obvious that the Bolsheviks thought of themselves as, in a certain sense, "restoring" common property, enacting an "apparent return to the old", although "on a higher plane of development". This is true in the sense that they believed in the dialectic—even though the idea of a kind of "restoration" of the "mir" (which Marx himself was evidently unsure of) came to nothing. It is not difficult to see, in this

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1. SP V p 242.
3. Anti-Dühring, Moscow, 1959, p 477.
context, how Kilebnikov's view of the Revolution as a break-in of the primeval world found at least some support in the wider ferment of ideas of the period. We have noted already McLuhan's idea of the age of Radio as an "electric return to the tribal paleolithic age, to the world of the hunter".¹ This idea, if accepted, would seem to complement the Marxist view of the future as a kind of "return" to the stateless, tribal "primitive communism" of the past. In any event—whatever our opinion of the validity of such views—merely to appreciate that they have been and can be held is to realize the peculiar inadequacy of critics such as Renato Poggioli, who fail to grasp how Kilebnikov's yearning for the distant past could possibly have co-existed with any real commitment to the future.

A widespread view of the relationship between Russian Futurism and the Russian Revolution is that it was essentially a "mistake", on the part of the poets, to see any connection at all. Having noted that Futurism began to disintegrate between 1914 and 1916, Markov expresses this view when he explains:

The Revolution brought new blood to the movement, because Futurists, mistakenly, associated themselves with the revolution and expected now no obstacles in their development.²

A far more perceptive view of the relationship is presented by Erlich, who sees the "aesthetic" or "cultural" revolution as an integral part of the social revolution:

The Revolution of 1917 did not confine itself to a thorough overhauling of Russia's political and social structure; it also shook loose fixed patterns of behaviour and accepted moral codes and philosophical systems. This cultural upheaval was not a mere by-product of political revolution; it was spurred and accelerated, rather than brought about, by the breakdown of the old regime.³

¹ Counter-Blast, p 43.
Something like this view was also expressed by Lev Trotsky, who was one of the few Bolshevik leaders to write perceptively about Futurism and is therefore worth quoting. Writing of "Khlebnikov's or Kruchenykh's making ten or one hundred new derivative words out of existing roots", Trotsky insists that such experiments lie "outside of poetry", even though they "may have a certain philological interest" and may, in a certain though very modest degree, facilitate the development of the living and even of the poetic language, and forecast a time when the evolution of speech will be more consciously directed.

But when he comes to survey the overall philological work achieved by the Futurists, Trotsky is much less equivocal, and it is evident that he treats the "linguistic revolution" as very much part of the wider social revolt:

The struggle against the old vocabulary and syntax of poetry, regardless of all its Bohemian extravagances, was a progressive revolt against a vocabulary that was cramped and selected artificially with the view of being undisturbed by anything extraneous; a revolt against impressionism, which was sipping life through a straw; a revolt against symbolism which had become false in its heavenly vacuity, against Zinaida Rippius and her kind, and against all the other squeezed lemons and picked chicken-bones of the little world of the liberal-mystic intelligentsia. If we survey attentively the period left behind, we cannot help but realize how vital and progressive was the work of the Futurists in the field of philology. Without exaggerating the dimensions of this "revolution" in language, we must realize that Futurism has pushed out of poetry many worn words and phrases, and has made them full-blooded again and, in a few cases, has happily created new words and phrases which have entered, or are entering, into the vocabulary of poetry and which can enrich the living language. This refers not only to the separate word, but also to its place among other words, that is, to syntax. In the field of word-formations, Futurism truly has gone somewhat beyond the limits which a living language can hold. The same thing, however, has happened with the Revolution; and is the "sin" of every living movement."

1. Literature and Revolution, p 133.
2. Loc cit.
3. Ibid p 142.
To the extent that Trotsky found fault with the Futurists, it was only owing to what he saw as "sins" of a similar nature—sins of over-optimism, of impatience and of "ultra-leftism" which had characterized the Revolution itself. The "formalism" of the Futurists represented an insistence on shaping life, fusing with life and overturning the "contents" of the old world (giving "form" priority over "content" in that sense) in a thoroughly revolutionary way. As Nikolai Punin put it in 1919:

Art is form (being), just as socialist theory and Communist revolution is form... The Internationale is just as much a futurist form as any other creative form... I ask what difference is there between the Third Internationale and Tatlin's bas-relief of Khlebnikov's "Martian Trumpet"? To me there is none.1

Mayakovsky made a similar claim when he declared:

The revolution of substance—socialism—anarchism—is not to be thought of apart from the revolution of form—futurism.2

The purpose of the new art was not to communicate ideas (other means were available for that—perhaps even a language of numbers, as Khlebnikov suggested3) but to create things and life, and recreate the world. As Brik declared:

We don't need your ideas! ... If you are artists, if you can create and make—then make us our human nature, our human things.4

It was in this spirit that El Lissitzky declared:

we shall give a new face to this globe, we shall reshape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognize its satellite.5

Trotsky agreed that there would come a "time when life will reach such proportions that it will be entirely formed by art..."6

2. Quoted in: ibid, p 195.
3. SP V p 158.
5. In: Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit, p 328.
But he insisted that, despite the Russian revolution, it would be a long time before this came about. In the meantime—alongside more 'modern' forms of art—an art which "mirrored" life would continue to be required. Trotsky criticized the Futurists' attempt "to tear out of the future that which can only develop as an inseparable part of it", saying that the artists responsible reminded him of "anarchists who anticipate the absence of government in the future" but "have no bridge to the future."  

For Trotsky, then, the kind of world which the Futurists required for their art was one which could only emerge after a long period of revolutionary work. Nevertheless, this future would emerge. The "future" of the Futurists, in this sense, was also the "future" fought for by the revolutionary movement as a whole. There was an intimate and necessary connection between the Futurists' dreams and the aims of the Revolution, even if there were disagreements as to how the future could be reached.  

It is not necessary to agree with these arguments to see that the view of Futurism's revolutionary commitments as a "mistake" is shallow in the extreme. One can agree or disagree with the aims and hopes of the revolutionary movement as a whole. But to describe the revolution's artistic expression as "mistakenly" associated with its other expressions is simply nonsensical.  

The real "sin" of the Futurists—an extreme revolutionary optimism, impatience and millenarism—had also been, to a large extent (as Trotsky concedes), the "sin" of the Revolution itself. In the earliest period of the Revolution, many even of the wildest dreams and expectations of the Futurists could be seen as having at least some foundation in the wider revolutionary optimism of the time. As Shklovsky writes:

1. Literature and Revolution, p 137.
2. Ibid pp 134-5.
In the early years of the revolution there was no existence, or rather, the storm itself was existence. There was no man of calibre who did not go through a period of faith in the revolution. One believed in the Bolsheviks. Germany and England would fall—and the frontiers that no-one needed any more would be ploughed up. And heaven would be rolled up like a scroll of parchment...

When Khlebnikov signed manifestos on behalf of the "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" and Kamensky proclaimed the Futurists "the poets of all-mankind's revolution", it was in an atmosphere of just such hopes and expectations as these.

To Mayakovsky, the revolution represented the ultimate defiance of byt. The whole earth was engulfed in a revolutionary ocean—liquid and flowing—in which states, bourgeois relationships and the personal agonies of the past were being swept away. But as the dream of a world revolution failed to materialize, and the revolution in Russia grew cold, the reign of byt seemed to be establishing itself with a grip more total even than before. Mayakovsky dreamed of a new revolution, and of a Fourth and a Fifth International. But the process of cooling and solidification went on. "By April, 1930", as Erlich writes,

when Mayakovsky shot himself through the heart, the revolutionary chaos which he celebrated so resonantly had solidified into the mold of the most elaborate system of cultural repression in modern history.

Mayakovsky needed revolution as other men need air.

Khlebnikov, too, needed the same element of chaos in which to breathe. It may be that he was even less capable of surviving without it than Mayakovsky. Writing of the chaotic revolutionary period, Korney Zelinsky observes that life in it was an "unreal" one—an "existence of being constantly on the move"—and suggests:

Perhaps only the "chairman of the world", Velimir Khlebnikov, who was entirely immersed in it, wished for nothing else. All the others began to organize their existence as they could...

4. Shklovsky suggests that Mayakovsky would have committed suicide much earlier had the revolution not broken out—see Stahlberger op cit p 122.
There is no need at this point to detail Khlebnikov's view of the revolution: the preceding pages have shown how he saw it as a "rebirth", a leap into the future and at the same time a return to the prehistoric past. To Khlebnikov, the revolution was "his own" revolution—he had, after all, predicted its date long in advance—and an event through which his theories and dreams were being materialized. When it occurred, it was almost a familiar thing to him. ¹ It was a "shift"—an abrupt transfer on to a new plane of existence. He had long been used to such things in his own poetry: the entire revolution was almost to be seen as only a colossal "realization" of an artistic "device". It was a movement in which the right to terrestrial property was being destroyed and replaced by the battle for time. But Khlebnikov had "foreseen" this in 1916. ² In the storm of revolutions, Khlebnikov and his colleagues were to be crowned with laurel-wreaths and made "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere." But already in 1916, Khlebnikov wrote that he had been made "head of the first State of Time in the world". ³ It was almost as if, for Khlebnikov, the Revolution had already in a sense happened in advance—as if it really did not matter too much what particular point in time he was writing in, since he stood in a way astride and outside the time dimension, determining its course as a railway-pointsman guides the path of a train.

The starting-point for Khlebnikov was the revolution of form. The core of his revolt was a linguistic one. Where Mayakovskiy fought to defy the reign of 'byt' as the hardening and fossilization of life, Khlebnikov fought first and foremost against the hardening and fossilization of language—a struggle which in effect took (to a large extent) the form of a fight against the linguistic results and implications of literacy. The struggle was for a restoration of the primacy of sound in language and for the impermanence, pervasiveness and "darkness" (in the sense earlier discussed) of the world of sounds. The

¹ Compare with Shklovsky's comment that "Mayakovskiy entered the revolution as he would enter his own home"—quoted in: Woroszylnski op cit p 174.
² SP V p 132.
³ SP V p 130.
* "svdvig".
fight for fluidity, transience, newness, strangeness and change
in language (and the fight for "inventions" in science and tech-
nology) seemed naturally to be a fight not for space but for
time. Where Mayakovsky fought against 'byt' in social and polit-
ical life as state officialdom and bureaucracy, Khlebnikov
fought against it as "the states of space".

Khlebnikov welcomed "inventions" in general, but reserved
his most ardent enthusiasm for those connected with "lightning". He saw Radio as "the language of lightning" and believed that it
would achieve the aim of his "universal language"—the unification
of mankind. Khlebnikov treated Radio very much as he treated the
"magical" and "transrational" language of primitive chants,
prayers and folk-culture, saw humanity as a "ray" and talked of
"a sonorous string of tribes" stretching across the globe. He
believed that the entire Earth itself could be treated "as a
resonant plate". Radio and its visual extension would become
"the ears and eyes" of the world. Although he usually referred
to the future as a "State of Time", he also thought of it as
a "state of sounds". The entire globe would be embraced by a
web of sound-waves; territorial "frontiers" and "spaces" would
"wilt". Khlebnikov saw this process as occurring not by whim
or individual choice but by necessity—inevitably and, in a way,
"compulsorily". He wrote to Mayakovsky in 1921:

I am thinking of writing a thing in which all 3 milliard
of humanity would participate, and in which it would be
obligatory for mankind to play. But ordinary language is
unsuitable for it; a new one will have to be created step
by step.

1. See Mayakovsky's The Bathhouse and Bedbug in particular.
2. SP V p 161.
3. SP IV p 292.
4. SP V p 89.
5. Ibid p 132.
This suggestion should be seen as an elaboration of Khlebnikov's idea of "the world as a poem"¹, which we noted earlier. A related notion was Khlebnikov's picture of the futurist (budetlyan) as a balalaika-player, plucking the strings of the globe, of human heart-beats and of humanity's fate.²

Some ideas of Marshall McLuhan which seem relevant have been discussed above. Khlebnikov's "world as a poem" idea, however, can be related not only to McLuhan's concept of "electronic" and "technological" art taking "the whole earth and its population as its material", but also to the ideas of some who were living and writing in Russia in Khlebnikov's own time. Vassily Kamensky writes, discussing the futurists in the early revolutionary years, that

new creative projects of a cosmic scale were born in our circle every day.³

In relation to plans to stage Mayakovsky's play depicting the world revolution, Kamensky recalls:

We were dreaming of a revolutionary mass theatre of the future, where thousands of people, as well as hundreds of cars and airplanes, would fill a gigantic arena, creating for millions the vision of, say, the heroic epic of the October Revolution.⁴

However, here the mention of cars and airplanes indicates that Kamensky was still thinking in mechanical, rather than electronic terms. It was electricity and Radio which seemed to promise the most effective means of creating an art-form to involve millions and embrace the globe. Where Khlebnikov talked of "people-rays" and "lightning", Malevich spoke of "I-beams" and "electricity".⁵ Khlebnikov's vision of Radio uniting the globe and of the world as a poem was matched by the words of El Lissitzky, written in 1920:

only a creative work which fills the whole world with its energy can join us together by means of its energy components to form a collective unity like a circuit of electric current.⁶

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¹ SP V p 259.
² Ibid p 239.
³ In: Woroszyński, op cit p 233.
⁴ Loc cit. The play was Mayakovsky's "Mystery Bouffe".
⁵ Iskusstvo Kommuny, no 12, Feb 23 1919; in: Malevich op cit p 72
⁶ Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 530.
At first sight, Khlebnikov's world view, like much of his poetry, seems to be composed of various incomplete and incompatible fragments. There are his views on sound-meanings, his numerical researches, his world-government project, his dream of conquering fate, his conception of the prehistoric past, his enthusiasm for "inventions" and so on. Just as Markov sees a conflict between Khlebnikov's poetry and his thought, so it is possible to see a conflict between almost every element of his thought and every other one. His primitivism clashes with his futurism, his Russian nationalism with his universalism, his mathematical "ultra-rationalism" with his championship of transreason and his "formalism" with his revolutionary commitment. Khlebnikov himself was aware that he had not explained himself.1 His great book on numbers and fate was left unwritten. Just before he died, it seems that he began almost to panic at the thought of what he had left undone. Perhaps also a sense that the revolution was cooling and failing added to his alarm. In any event, Khlebnikov's friend Spassky recalls that in the spring of 1922 there was a "disturbed aura" around Khlebnikov, which began to get worse. Spassky visited Khlebnikov in Moscow and was walking with him one day through some dark, winding alleys:

Just then I remarked, I do not know why, that it was time to put Khlebnikov's work in order. I said that it was all scattered, a number of brochures, lost in space. Where is it all? There is no book to speak of.

He reacted to this with unexpected passion. There was anxiety and excitement in what he was saying. He did not complain about any particular person. But he spoke about careless treatment of his manuscripts, about unrealized projects...

In the spring Khlebnikov suddenly felt extremely tired. He would sit sulking in his brother's room. He would rush to the table, spread his manuscripts, panic, and sigh over them. He would rush to the Briks, full of anxious decisiveness. On one occasion he took me with him. He was in a hurry, as if anxious to explain something. In answer to the question from behind the door, he frantically shouted his name. The Briks were not in; Khlebnikov rushed on. It was as if he were looking for someone with whom he wanted to share some urgent reflections.

Sometime in May he moved out of his brother's apartment and left Moscow.

In the summer news came of his death.2

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With so many of Khlebnikov's concepts only half-formed and fragmentarily-expressed, there are obvious difficulties and risks in any attempt at interpretation. In the preceding pages, an attempt has been made to show that, despite the reality of the conflicting tensions in Khlebnikov's thought, the outlines of a relatively coherent and consistent world-view can at a deeper level be discerned. Central to his view of the future was his concept of revolution as a "shift" or "displacement" of temporal planes. The oral past and the electronic future were con-joined, in a process which cut out the present. Man and the universe were being turned on a new axis—the axis of time instead of that of space. Khlebnikov's excitement and anticipation began, as we have seen, long in advance of the revolution itself. But at no time was his enthusiasm so great as in the days immediately preceding the Bolshevik insurrection. "In those days", as he wrote afterwards,

the word "Bolshevik" rang with a strange pride, and it soon became clear that the phantoms of "today" were about to be ripped apart by gunfire.1

In his imagination it was he and his colleagues who had seized the Winter Palace and the communications-media and were broadcasting to the world:

Here. The Winter Palace. To Alexandra Fedorovna Kerenskaya. To all. To all. To all... What? You still don't know that the Government of the Terrestrial Sphere already exists? Well, well—so you don't know it exists! The Government of the Terrestrial Sphere. Signatures.2

2. Ibid p 110.